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BETHESDA



B E T H E S D A

BY

BARBARA ELBON

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOLUME I.

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VOL. I.

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Thou art my heaven and my hell ;

R. W. GILDER.

CHAPTER I.

‘A face at once young, grand, and beautiful, where, if there is any melancholy, it is no feeble passivity, but enters into the foreshadowed capabilities of heroism.’—GEORGE ELIOT.

BETWEEN Genoa and Florence is one of the most beautiful bits of the far-famed Cornice Road. On leaving the superb city the railway winds through orange and pomegranate groves, along oleander hedges, across narrow valleys made by hills which are clothed in olive orchards and crowned by Italian pines. It rises and falls obedient to the dictates of nature, yielding to obstructions only to conquer them, and now runs by the foaming Mediterranean, and again crosses a sea-rent chasm at a dizzy altitude. High crags, pedestals for single trees, rise abruptly from the waves that dash against their base; while on

some of the larger rocks castles are built, or gray-walled villages, with a bit of beach beneath where fishing-boats lie in deep colouring of red and brown. The people run out in peasant array at the sound of the engine-bell, and, on one of the first winter days in 187—, the inhabitants of the rocky fastnesses caught a glimpse of a girl's face which seemed a human type akin to that of the landscape. It was not lacking in strength, but showed a pre-eminent refinement, which was full of passionate sensitiveness. The features were finely cut, and the complexion of a clear pallor, which made more forceful the long eyebrows slightly curving over large hazel eyes, and the golden-brown hair which was drawn simply away from a forehead capable of much serenity. In animation the changes of warm sunshine and soft shadow which characterised the view were here also ; but in repose a sadness of expression settled upon the face, often seen in countenances denoting at once youth and earnestness. To-

day, however, there was added an anxiety which the beauty of the view could not dissipate.

This was her twentieth birthday, and standing by the carriage window she looked off over the water to the far horizon, trying in vain to pierce its pearly veil, as if thus she might see the future. She had endeavoured to throw aside the vague feeling which weighed upon her, but no effort could overcome an oppressive dread, the effects of which troubled her aunt, who was watching her, Mrs. Trescott, the only other occupant of the carriage.

‘Come here, Beth, and tell me what is the matter,’ she said at last. ‘Must birthday thoughts be so very melancholy? I wanted you to have a happy day, and you said nothing would gratify you so much as reaching Florence. Did you overtax your strength? Are you too tired, dear?’

The last sentence was added with increased anxiety in noticing the jasmine pallor and an

unwonted weariness in the eyes Beth turned towards her.

‘No, indeed, dear auntie,’ answered the girl, seating herself, however. ‘I am not more tired than I naturally must be after the long journey.’

‘Well, then, what is it, pet? The day is perfect, the views lovely, and you are on your way to the place where you say you have longed to be all the year: our own rooms at Florence. Don’t have secrets from me, dear; why should your birthday be sad?’

‘Not sad, auntie; only——’ She moved so as to turn her face away before she continued. ‘It is very foolish of me, I know, but I can’t remember how many years it is that I have felt the decade opening to-day was to be of great importance to me. I am sure some decisive test of character will come soon, which I fear, I greatly fear, I may not bear worthily.’

Her voice stopped suddenly. There had been an unusual quiver of feeling in it from the

first, which now increased so as to make speech dangerous. She was not given to superstitious fancies, but this had grown in her until it seemed to cast a long shadow over the coming years.

Mrs. Trescott was of a much less reasonable temperament than her niece, but she was also prone to think that the 'feelings' of others were not to be relied upon, whatever her own might be; so she only thought, 'The child is too tired,' and said in a cheery tone :

'Why, what a foolish girl! You are always lecturing me for putting faith in such nonsense, and here you are twice as silly, I'm sure. Besides, I haven't had the training of you for nothing. If you did have a "test," you would come out of it with flying colours. *I am not afraid.*'

'But that only makes me more so,' answered the girl, with increased earnestness. 'You have too much confidence in me, auntie; I have never done anything to deserve it. Don't you see—— How can you tell what will be my

temptations, or how I will resist them? No one can. And so—— Well, it is like a cloud between me and the sun.'

'Leave it to the sun to dissipate, Dolly. Look out, and enjoy yourself. It does no good to brood over a thing in this fashion.'

'Probably not,' said the girl, somewhat drearily. She was half disappointed in her aunt's careless answers. The presentiment weighed too heavily for her not to desire a firm support, in recognition of a possible failure, and helpful words to reinforce her already unnerved strength. But Mrs. Trescott did not understand the inner workings of this girl's mind, which she thought she knew through and through. She saw Beth's rare tears were near the surface, however, and poured out a glass of sherry, saying:

'Here, you will find this much more palatable than swallowing unshed tears; and as to crying—— Why, if you cry to-day, it would be a

dreadful reproach to me, for I should know you were just worn out, and that I ought not to have done as you teased me to,—which I always do, you little witch !’

The stimulant did Beth good, and the confessing of her trouble also. It looked sillier now that it had been spoken, and her aunt left her no time to brood, but began to talk of other things.

‘Don’t you wish you knew what I am going to give you to-day?’ she asked presently. ‘You couldn’t have lovelier associations than these. Just look there !’

The train was moving with exceeding care across a great chasm, bridged by a natural arch, hundreds of feet above the sea. As Beth leaned out she could see nothing except the perpendicular cliffs and the leaping, restless waves far below.

It was a dizzy sight, and fascinating, as such sights often are. The girl was tired and excited.

She felt an intense desire to fall through the air, and touch the water beneath. The longing took her breath quite away. She gave a little gasp, and her head sank on the window-sill. Then, through the rush in her ears and the sound of the quickening train, she heard her aunt's voice, as from a distance, in alarmed accents.

‘Beth! Beth! be careful! What is the matter?’

‘Nothing,’ she contrived to say after a moment. ‘Just let me be quiet.’ Then presently: ‘I suppose I was dizzy. But it was a strange feeling.’

‘Change seats with me,’ said Mrs. Trescott emphatically. ‘You must not look out of the window. Here is your present instead.’

‘A ring? Oh, it is beautiful. I never saw one like it.’

‘There isn’t such another in all the world!’ exclaimed Mrs. Trescott. ‘We tired ourselves to death hunting for something, and this, at last,

just pleased me. Monsieur d'Isten discovered it at a queer place way down in the city, he said. He brought it for me to see, and I took it without more ado. I think it is just perfect.'

'I like it,' said Beth, in a tone of thorough satisfaction. 'It is becoming, too; but look inside.' There were a number of Arabic characters clearly engraved. 'Can you read it? Try.'

After turning it around several times, Beth deciphered: 'Let not grass grow on the path of love—or friendship.' 'The same word means both, I believe.'

'Brava! You hardly need such an admonition, however. I now—— Well, my way is best after all. When a friendship once commences to languish let it go. No amount of galvanism will make it lifelike. Still, one might afford to pull up a weed now and then in the pathway, I daresay. The best way, though, is to travel it often and crush the seeds down.'

'We won't let any seeds have a chance to

sprout in our path, will we, auntie ?' said Beth fondly. 'But how did you know what it was ? Have you been studying Arabic too ?'

'Oh, my dear ! imagine me ! No. M. d'Isten translated it for me. He was born in Algeria, you know.'

'I didn't know it.'

'Yes, he is the son of the Marquis de F——, lieutenant-general of the forces there.'

'Indeed ?' exclaimed Beth, in pleased surprise. 'Why, the Marquis was the one who sent us our escort, and was so very kind to us, although we missed our opportunity of seeing him. He is a man of whom one hears nothing but praise. Can M. d'Isten be his son ?'

'I don't see why you should be so very much astonished. That is the precise man I should have said would be René d'Isten's father.'

There was a slight *hauteur* in her manner which Beth did not notice at the moment.

'I thought you had quarrelled,' she said,

‘and that you did not like him so well as at first.’

‘I don’t. He has disappointed me.’ A shadow crossed Mrs. Trescott’s face as she spoke; a shadow of mingled pride, offence, and repression. She was exercising unusual self-control.

‘So he is an Algerene,’ said Beth, with interest. ‘And the wife of the Marquis, was she a native or French?’

‘She was an *Orientale*, a Christian of the open Bible, as they call it. Her son always speaks of her with much reverence.’

‘And of his father too, I’m sure.’

‘He is proud of him, but I fancy the Marquis is a cold man.’

‘Perhaps, but every one admires him,’ exclaimed Beth eagerly. ‘He has, they say, the keenest sensitiveness to honour. A true Bayard.’

‘Hum!’ was the sceptical comment of Mrs. Trescott.

‘His son is not like him in that, then?’

‘I thought so—once, but that passed, as all such ideas do.’

She spoke bitterly, but Beth, used to frank confidence between them, asked :

‘What happened? You never told me the cause of the trouble.’

‘I never shall, probably,’ was the unexpected rebuff. ‘He failed in respect to me. That is enough for my niece to know.’

Beth sat a moment dumb with surprise. ‘Then you do not expect to meet him again, I suppose,’ she said presently, and Mrs. Trescott answered, with assumed carelessness :

‘Oh, yes ; we may meet. I don’t know that I should be angry with him now ; only, we are not friends.’

‘A fine bit of sarcasm,’ thought the girl, but she exclaimed frankly :

‘Well, I hope we won’t meet!’

‘Why not?’ retorted Mrs. Trescott sharply.

‘I never fancied him from what you yourself told me of him when you liked him best,’ said Beth, with some spirit. ‘I tried to hold myself neutral until I should see him as long as he was your friend; yet when I heard that I should not have to know him it was a relief.’

Mrs. Trescott looked at her with contradictory meanings in her face.

‘Yet you admire his father so much!’ she said at last.

‘They are very different apparently.’ After a pause the girl added in a firm tone: ‘Didn’t you say M. d’Isten was married?’

‘Yes.’

‘Have you met his wife?’

‘No; she does not live in Paris.’

‘And does he live there all the year?’

‘As far as I know. But you needn’t cross-question me any further. It is a disagreeable subject. You haven’t thanked me for your ring yet.’

‘Ah,’ said her niece, with a smile like a sun-beam, ‘it is what I most desired.’

She took her aunt’s hand, and kissed her wrist above the glove. All the constraint in Mrs. Trescott’s manner vanished.

‘That is pretty thanks, dear. I am glad you have the ring. It seemed to belong to you from the first.’

It was a heavy hoop of yellow gold, with a leaf lying on it, against which was a ruby rose with a diamond in its heart.

‘I wonder who it was made for?’ mused the girl, turning it from side to side so that the gems should catch the light. ‘Perhaps for some sultana who wore it in the harem, where she was for ever queen. Perhaps for some Christian maiden, whose lover gave her this as a betrothal ring; that diamond might be the virgin who was enwrapped in the folds of his heart. Or perhaps—the gem might be a tear, too—it was the symbol of a love which should last through the

circle of eternity, even though grief lay in its midst.'

She looked up smiling, a little gravely.

'You romantic child!' laughed Mrs. Trescott. 'That last supposition would only be thought of by one as foolish as you. But dream away as much as you like, so long as you don't dream anything sad. I can't have my present bring you sorrow even in fancy, sweet.'

'No danger. It is too lovely for that.'

The rest of the journey passed in comparative silence. Mrs. Trescott was reading the last crowned French novel; Beth was thinking,—rather dreaming. Her mind wandered back to the broken home in Massachusetts; to the sister who was her one youthful, earnest companion; to the aunt and uncle with whom this sister lived; while she and the aunt who had brought her up wandered over the face of the earth, and found only occasional oases of rest, as they would now find a few months' quiet in Florence.

And meanwhile under all her musings lay the dull, haunted feeling which, ghost-like, vanished when she tried to find its substance, and, without words, made her understand that the future was in its power; she could not escape it. Her mental horizon reminded her of the desert she had so lately traversed. Long sable dunes sweeping away, with no boundary but the sky; waves of sand, changing under the wind, to break only into other tawny waves, and, while changing, ever the same.

The desert had made a great impression upon her. Its silence, its weird immensity, its burning suns and wondrous stars, had all wrought their influence upon her. She had come to understand why the Arabs were fatalists there; would this shadowy future teach her to be one?

She was roused from her reveries by the sight of the Flower City beneath them. They had crossed the last pass of the Apennines, and were striking down into the valley. As Beth saw the

town which she dearly loved, where many happy hours had been spent, and friends would soon know of their unexpected arrival, she regained something of her usual spirits ; and her eyes lost all their sadness as the well-known buildings came near, the Lily Tower and the grand cathedral conspicuous above the closely-packed houses.

‘Isn’t it the loveliest city in the world?’ she exclaimed. ‘See! there is the river, and our house. I can even catch the reflection of the windows! It’s like coming home; it is our heart’s home, isn’t it, auntie?’

‘How would you like to live here always?’ asked Mrs. Trescott, looking up at the girl, as she stood with her hands clasped through the door-strap, her slender figure swaying pliantly. ‘Margaret could come over, and we all live here together. You don’t care for America much.’

‘But I do care for persons there. Margaret

never could leave Aunt Agatha; and, besides, she could not be happy here. They think we lead aimless lives.'

'I am sure, with your music, and now your writing, you do more than they do! And you could not be here at all, but for me. However, I was not serious. Of course, America is the place to live in.'

'But we have this winter, at least, in dear Florence!' exclaimed Beth. 'Aren't you glad?'

'Yes, I like Italy. I hope it may be a very happy year to you,' she added tenderly. 'We have much to be thankful for; you were so ill a year ago, and now you are almost well again.'

'Quite well, auntiè,' corrected Beth. 'You know we are going to forget I am not a Samson, and try gaiety fearlessly. But, dear,' and her voice grew sweet and grave, 'most of all, I want to make you happy. You have been so good to me!'

Mabel Trescott's answer was a warm pressure

of Beth's hand, but nothing more was said, for the train now puffed slowly into the station.

A few moments later they were rolling over the clean streets, Beth recognising each landmark with affectionate pride, and admiring anew the palaces which raise themselves, 'by three long-drawn breaths,' higher than any houses in Europe. In one of these was the suite they had made into a home. The windows looked out in front between stately houses, on to the Arno, and olive-clothed hills beyond, now crimsoned by the setting sun. On the other side the apartment opened into a half-wild garden, where the ilex alleys and measured parterres were overgrown with ivy and clambering roses.

As the delighted servants rushed out through the medieval gateway to kiss the hands of their *care signore*, Beth felt a glow of pleasure which warmed her heart. She ran lightly up the marble staircase, and, greeting the *padrone* with a glad nod, went on ahead of him into the *sala*.

How familiar everything was ! There was the same triangular fireplace in the corner, where wood was already burning ; the same confusion of tables and sofas, *etagères*, and easels ; the same shadowy Rembrandts and glowing Titians ; and the painted Aurora still floated among her substantial clouds on the high ceiling. Also—yes, surely—there was her favourite fragrance of tea-roses permeating the air.

‘Who could have sent these ?’ she exclaimed, bending over a bowlful of the creamy beauties. The beaming *padrone* bowed profoundly in the doorway as he answered :

‘We Tuscans have good memories, signorina mia.’

‘You don’t mean you remembered my birthday?’ she cried, her dark eyes shining. She gave the old man her hand : ‘*Mille grazie*, signore.’

‘Ah, signora,’ he said, lifting her fingers to his lips, ‘no one could forget your sweet patience last year. It does an old man’s heart good to

see you well, and that you care for us still, although you have been far over the waters.'

'There is nothing like it there,' she answered, with a little decisive gesture. And then Mrs. Trescott coming in, and business usurping attentions, Beth slipped off alone into her rose boudoir.

Here, too, all was familiar, and doubly dear. By the fire was the *chaise longue*, on which she had passed days and weeks during the languor of convalescence. A buhl cabinet stood opposite the window, and above it hung an inspired sibyl, in the full light of the great window, whose curtains made all one end of the room a mass of snowy draperies.

Leaning against the casement, and looking out into the twilight garden, Beth said earnestly:

'I have conquered much in this room; I will trust I shall more.'

Not suffered, or endured, but conquered, was her thought.

A few hours later Mrs. Trescott had retired,

and the moon had risen, and was sending a silver flood through one of the great arched windows into the *sala*. Presently Beth lifted the curtain of the little study, and came out into the dim room. She wanted space around her. She needed to breathe freely before she could rest.

The light from the half-shaded door made but a faint impression on the shadowy vastness of the apartment, but the effect of the moonlight on the indistinct masses of furniture and glimmering marbles pleased Beth's mood. She was impressionable, and the memory of this being the house where Dante's Beatrice used to live came back to her now with a thrill of delight.

She went and seated herself on the wide window-ledge in the full shower of moonbeams. With the pure outline of her uplifted face, and her sweeping white draperies, she might have been taken for the mystic maiden of whom she thought. The ring still glowed on her hand like a drop of blood, but she had forgotten it.

‘What a glorious destiny it was to lead such a man through heaven!’ she was saying to herself. ‘The highest a woman could have. No, there was Mary, she was blessed among women, and yet, how she suffered! But who would not bear the agony for the joy of giving food to hungry humanity? Nothing is too hard to undergo, if we let it only make us nobler.’

She spoke bravely, half aloud. It was an answer to the fear that had been haunting her. She met it now fairly. It might do its worst; good would ensue.

Thus exorcised, the spirit left her, and her thoughts wandered to other things. The year had been a happy one, yet in many ways serious. A man had loved her, and she had liked him. She had tried to do more. Her aunt pleaded his cause; his mother also. But it is a trying situation for any man to attempt to be the ideal of an intelligent girl during the years when her ideas are constantly changing. Idealising men

is the next step to idealising dolls. An enthusiastic girl can make an idol out of a stick, but she won't worship it unless she believes in it. This Beth had not been able to do. Her aunt's influence was all towards making a marriage on the basis of esteem and liking. Mrs. Randleth's (an Englishwoman) had, of course, been the same. Beth did like Clarence, but she never felt the indescribable repulsion from him so much as when she admired him most, and saw the most reason in her friends' urgings.

It wore upon her, delicate as she was from her long illness, and she accepted an invitation from Aunt Agatha, and went home suddenly, on a few months' visit, leaving Mrs. Trescott for a summer trip with friends.

It had all become clear to her there; how, she could not exactly say. Perhaps it was being in the truly conjugal atmosphere that Mr. and Mrs. Stanhope gave to their home. Perhaps it was

the awakening of her national independence within her. Whatever was the cause, Clarence was quietly made to understand that there was no hope of her yielding, and she returned to Europe fancy free.

But the new key which she had struck in touching American ideas and customs, after her long residence abroad,—if flitting can be so called,—and which had seemed harsh at the time, echoed, unconsciously to herself, through old associations now renewed. She found a difference in opinion between herself and her aunt which she had never noticed before. She discovered that the unprogressive actions and notions of the conservative old world were less sympathetic to her than they had been. Perhaps this grew more rapidly from the force of contrast, during her travels in Spain, where traditional ideas are most blindly held, and Algeria, where ideas of any kind seem a thing of the forgotten past. Moreover, being separated

from one who had been accustomed to unquestioning obedience from her, and who never hesitated with advice or commands, gave her an opportunity of developing independence which she needed.

Her sister Margaret, with her radical adhesion to her own principles and opinions, helped her too. She wished now she could be more with her sister. It was an influence which, though silent, was thousand-tongued. There was no one to rival her in Beth's heart. To her aunt she was devotedly attached, but her sister was closer, indeed thoroughly at one with her. As for lovers—— Well, Beth had often asserted, as many girls of high ideals do in this age, her conviction that she would never marry. Yet she was always, half consciously, expecting the demi-god who would rout her conviction, and prove that she knew nothing of what she said.

Meantime her heart slept, as did nature around her under the starry, purple sky. Pre-

sently the dawn would come ; and what would the light awaken that now was wrapped in dewy silence ? It was winter now ; the plant was there, but no bud ; what fruit, then, would ripen in the summer sunlight ?

CHAPTER II.

‘She sitteth in a silence of her own ;
Behind her, on the ground, a red rose lies ;
Her thinking brow is bent, nor doth arise
Her gaze from that shut book whose word unknown
Her firm hands hide from her.’

R. W. GILDER.

It was a glorious day in early February. Already spring was making itself felt in the subtle excitant of the air, and showing itself in the crocuses and wild hyacinths. The trees were perforce letting fall the yellow leaves of last year, because of the swelling buds that came to replace them. There is no use exercising tenacity when the inner growth says—
Past.

In the old garden behind celestial Beatrice’s earthly home the grass was fresh and short,

the roses were beginning to bud, the air was fragrant, and birds were wooing one another among the branches. Bethesda Hamilton, of course, was there in the heart of it all. She was devoted to the picturesque spot, with its cacti-topped walls, opening to let one see the river and hills and far-reaching valley. Often she would lie for hours on the sod looking and dreaming.

For the time it satisfied her. She could look at those far-away hills, and the time-toned towers, and the shimmering olive groves, until she seemed to feel what they felt, coming curiously near to nature. She could listen to the birds, and the children's voices, and the chimes of sacred bells, until they made a rhythm within her, to which every pulse beat musically, and each ruddy drop flowed in tune.

So there she was this morning, secluded and yet open to sky and air, when Mrs. Trescott spied her blue gown on the grass, and came out

with a letter in her hand. Beth was immediately all animation. She sprang up and ran to meet her aunt.

‘A letter for me?’ she cried. ‘From Margaret?’

‘From somebody you may yet like better,’ said Mabel.

‘As if that could be! Oh, from Clarence!’ Her voice fell with such a tone of disappointment that Mrs. Trescott laughed.

‘He *would* be flattered!’

‘Is this all?’ asked Beth.

‘Yes; the mail was evidently absorbed in bringing you that. I hope it is worth it.’

She waited, strolling here and there, as if she expected Beth to read it, but the girl was not in the mood.

Presently Mabel disappeared again into the house, and Beth was left alone to her disturbed reverie. It was indeed disturbed. The restlessness and sweet pain of spring had come closer to

her now. It was hardly sweet, it was so keen. She threw herself on the grass again, and pressed close to the earth to still this uneasiness—was it of craving or regret?

After a little she took out the letter and read it. It was a manly note; only a few earnest words from one who felt he had a right to assure her of his steadfast devotion since he claimed nothing in return; except, indeed, the encouragement her purity lent to every one, to try to make his life better worth living, as the memory of her was helping him to do.

It touched Beth deeply. She would have given much had she been able to return Clarence Randleth's affection. The delight she would give, the rest she would feel, appealed to her strongly. The lack of stability in the circumstances around her had grievously influenced her character. There was not a side on which her nature did not reach out for something to which she could vow and keep fidelity; and her out-

stretched arms found nothing—her hands closed only on empty air.

Meantime, within the convex mirror which was turned to the world on every side there grew a personality as surely, if silently, as crystals form in the still sea-caves. And this personality had a magnetism which no one understood, least of all, perhaps, herself. She hardly knew of its existence, except when something rose within her that flung aside all outward interference and asserted itself supreme, as had been the case in her final decision about this lover.

Instinct was strong within her to defend the inner being; it was an imperious instinct; she never could definitely belie it. Those who passed the glassy walls of her courteous reserve and were admitted into her friendship found themselves in a dim mystic city, where they hardly knew what were their own shadows and what the natural inhabitants. Forms of light

and forms of darkness were there, and all freely to be known. But in the centre was a palace surrounded by a wide stream, which no one could either fathom or bridge. Here the being, who frightened Beth herself at times, lived in solitude, working silently, feeling passionately. She would look forth at those who stood on the other side and dipped impotent feet into the deep waves, scrutinising them, expectant of the one who was to cross in triumph, and to whom she would gladly relinquish her sovereignty. But she was not to be deceived; and to all as yet, plead as Beth might, she turned an averted face.

‘Beth! Girlie!’ called Mrs. Trescott.

Beth looked up and saw her aunt in the window, and behind her a man’s eager face. It was too eager for Beth not to be pleased, for each woman loves the true love in her lover, even if unrecognised. Yet she rose reluctantly. It was charming out, and she shrank from the

thought of sitting under this artist's eyes, which had subtly changed of late, and held a light she now half liked, now wholly disliked, to meet. But it was all so unsubstantial that she could find no adequate reason for refusing to do what he pleaded for persistently, and which she knew he had now again come to press.

So she lingered in answering her aunt's summons, and broke off a spray of the new leaves and passed it over her hand again and again, hesitating to enter. Thus hesitating Signor Straora found her.

He was a fine-looking man, with a strong face and deferential manners. He approached Beth now, bowing profoundly.

'Ah, signore, you thought I was very dilatory? To tell the truth, I was afraid to go in.'

'Thank you,' he said gravely.

'Why does that please you?' she asked in surprise. 'Do you like to be feared?'

'To-day it promises me much.'

‘What does it promise you?’ Her eyes fell after a glance at his face. She began to guess.

‘It promises me that you have forgiven whatever my offence may have been,’ he said eagerly, drawing a step nearer. ‘It promises me that you will not be obdurate; that I shall see you in my studio; that your kindness will intercede for me; that——’

‘Perhaps, signore,’ said Beth demurely; ‘perhaps it promises too much. Let us go in.’

The *sala* looked unusually attractive in its shadowy grace, coming from the noonday light, which had grown almost too intense. Mrs. Trescott was sewing in a recess, willing to leave Beth and Signor Straora undisturbed. She was the most lenient of chaperones; indeed, she tried to escape being one at all, she so detested the *rôle*.

But Beth intended to have all the protection she could. She seated herself close beside her aunt, and motioned Signor Straora to a chair not

very near. She was determined to be unapproachable. Promises, indeed! they were all the other way.

‘Was it hot out?’ said Mrs. Trescott carelessly, looking tropical enough with her warm colouring and dark curls against the bright window. She was a fair-skinned brunette, with eyes which sometimes go with this anomalous type, never seeming to be of the same colour twice, but varying from the luminous darkness of emotion to the light gray of indifference, or the sunny laughter of teasing moods; at all times a surprise. Signor Straora thought he had never seen a finer contrast than between her and her niece.

‘Too warm in February, auntie? It could not be for me even in summer, but——’

‘There was too much nature around to entertain Monsieur l’artist, eh?’ said Mabel in a teasing tone.

Beth rose a trifle abruptly. Her aunt ought

to support her, she thought ; two against one was unfair.

‘ If I am a true artist nothing could please me so well as nature,’ Signor Straora said meanwhile, addressing himself entirely to Mabel. ‘ A bit of garden like that in which I found the signorina would do for one of Raphael’s backgrounds.’ He shaded his eyes and looked out into the brilliant atmosphere.

‘ Tell me,’ said Beth, approaching him, now that he was impersonally occupied, ‘ what do you think of this engraving of Santa Anna from da Vinci ?’

‘ It is an excellent engraving,’ replied the artist critically.

‘ You speak as if you did not like the subject.’

‘ Nor do I. Can an artist expect to take a face, which is only clay modelled by character, and use the form without giving the soul’s expression ? In all Leonardo’s paintings I see the

woman who broke his heart and ruined his honour.'

He laid the engraving aside with a slight gesture of dislike. Beth bent over it with new interest.

'Nay,' she said eagerly, 'I thought you artists held that forms are supreme; that character cannot make a plain face beautiful, or a beautiful one ugly.'

'Signora,' said Straora, smiling, 'you are giving artists credit for less discrimination than most men, and it is our boast that we have more. Give me a pure-hearted woman with no deformity but plainness, as you say, and I could produce you a Virgin that would not shock you. There would be nothing in her face which would be inharmonious with pure beauty. But a woman such as Monna Lisa—it is blasphemy.'

Beth was smiling up at him with shining eyes. This met her ideal expectation; it was what she wished might be.

‘Ah, signorina!’ exclaimed the artist, suddenly fervent; ‘come but back to my studio, sit to me but twice more, and see what I will do!’

Before Beth could reply came a quick knock at the door, and Guinevere Conover, an English prima donna who was making a fine success in Florence, entered. She was a tall fair girl with golden hair of no artificial tint, but her eyebrows and lashes were dark, making the blue eyes an unexpected sight, and one which never fails to indicate a nature at combat with itself. She had become an ardent friend of Beth’s during the winter, and had a cluster of tea-roses now in her hand as a tribute to her little queen.

‘How could you come to see me when you are going to sing in the new opera to-night?’ exclaimed Beth, with fond rebuke, as soon as the introductions were over.

‘I couldn’t stand it at home,’ answered Miss Conover in an undertone, going towards the study to lay aside her wraps. ‘I must not do

anything to-day, and idleness just kills me. It gives me nerves, and fears, and all sorts of silly things, and I knew you would exercise them. Ah, love !' she exclaimed abruptly, as the curtain fell behind them, 'you are all my peace and my rest now. It's marvellous the effect you have on me. I feel it as soon as I come near. To-day I stood outside your door there, before I knocked, and just tried to feel you, as it were ; but it was nothing to having you right here.'

'You shall stay with me, then, as long as you like ; all day if you choose,' said Beth promptly. She knew the passionate woman had been thrown by an early disappointment on to the stage for work, and that now her whole devotion was given to her art except what—could it be?—was reserved for Bethesda. 'If I can quiet you, you shall have me,' she added tenderly.

'That is like you, sweet. Let me put this rose in your hair. It is too lovely for any other place. I remember when I first saw you, dressed

in sheer white, I thought you were like a tropical moonlight, so fair and clear, and yet with an undertone of passion in you which suggested exotic flowers, and palm trees, and——'

'And deserts!' interrupted Beth, turning away somewhat impatiently. 'Forgive me, but I can't bear to be talked about. I just hate myself to-day.'

'Why, what can be the matter, carissima?' With quick instinct she added presently: 'Is it the painter?'

'Precisely!' exclaimed Beth. 'I have been so stared at and studied by him that even when he says nothing I am conscious of myself and my poses. It's miserable! I feel like hiding myself in a cavern. Instead,' she added, with an effort after her usual manner, 'come in and talk to him. He is entertaining and appreciative; you will like one another.'

Signor Straora rose to meet them and to take his leave at the same time; but a word from

Beth persuaded him to stay, and the conversation was immediately easy and fluent. Beth delighted in listening to the witty sallies and vivacious replies which passed between Signor Straora and Miss Conover, but after a little the latter grew restless. This was not what she needed; Beth's presence did not exercise its charm with other persons intervening.

She rose, and, going to the piano, began turning over some music. When she could not have one, her instinct led her directly to the other.

'Sing us one little song, won't you, Evra?' urged Mrs. Trescott.

'Oh, she ought not,' interposed Beth. But to such a nature as Guinevere's danger lends piquancy. Besides, as she said, one song could not tire her.

She had soon chosen a simple minor air, with pathetic intervals and an appealing melody. It expressed the sorrow of a man who had laid his

beloved in the grave, and had planted flowers at her head and feet—one dark and sombre, to tell his grief; and one white and candid, to recall her purity.

Music is said to be the voicing of the emotions, and surely it was so here. The rare voice touched its hearers, and made their innermost wishes speak. Mrs. Trescott was restless under a rankling memory; Beth thought how far better it would be to love, and lose, if need were; and for a moment Straora's eyes rested on Beth's drooping head, with the rose in the warm coils, as a man might look at one who had the power to save him from sorrow bitterer than death.

When the chaste devotion of the last tones was hushed into silence, and a few words of appreciation had been spoken by the stranger, in a voice which quite satisfied the *artiste*, she said:

‘I will give you a treasure in return for your

kind words, signore. Beth, you will play us *my* sonata ?'

'Certainly,' said Beth. Here she was at home, and no false pride or obtrusive self-consciousness hampered her. She knew she could play, and she was pleased to give pleasure. So she took up her violin, and pressed it against her breast a moment; but once vibrating, she forgot all else.

The slumbering passion and pathos which underlay her nature flowed out in this beloved art, to which she had given years of study. She was really great at times, beautiful to look at, thrilling to listen to, infinite to suggest. No other person seemed to ensoul a sonata as did Bethesda. Every strain became a thought, and carried itself into one's brain. Each note seemed a magnet, to attract, and to hold. Finally, one felt one's self the instrument, and one's heart-strings were what she was touching, and each touch was an ecstasy and a pain; and one would

not have foregone this pain for the most brilliant joy.

When she finished and sank back, half-benumbed, as always by playing, Evra came and took the violin away, with cold hands and burning eyes.

‘You outdid yourself; is Mozart actually in you? I believe sometimes you are yourself a spirit, child.’

‘She is all spirit,’ said Signor Straora, standing near, and just touching her chair as if to detain her. What weird power was this that Beth exercised? Every one felt it, and these artist natures more than all.

She smiled up at them both.

‘I won’t vanish,’ she said. ‘You make me feel quite eerie, you two, so serious, and yet so absurd. Come, I’ll break the spell.’

She sprang up and gave herself a little shake. As she did so the flower fell from her hair. Signor Straora instantly picked it up.

‘There lies my power!’ exclaimed Beth, ‘in Evra’s gift. Sha’n’t we give it to him, to use as an amulet against the witch, mademoiselle?’

‘Not against her,’ he said, with peculiar emphasis, as Evra nodded assent. She left them and went over to say good-bye to Mrs Trescott.

Signor Straora seized his opportunity, and used it with good effect. He saw Miss Hamilton was softened by the music, and touched by their appreciation. He urged her to confer the greatest pleasure she could upon him, since his whole soul was in his art, and she, now, was necessary to it. He avoided with fine care too much personal warmth, and yet let his enthusiasm on art speak as it would. She wavered, and finally turned to her aunt.

Mrs. Trescott was quick in discerning the undercurrents of society where no personal bias blinded her, and was fond of saying that she had yet to see the man who could conceal his love for any woman when she had once seen the two

together. She generally prevented any possible mistake by taking it for granted that any given man loved any given woman whom he had met, until the contrary was proved ; and the contrary of love is not hate, but indifference.

She shrewdly suspected, therefore, that Signor Straora was 'in love' with her niece, but she did not look upon this as any reason why she should refuse a favour that would bring a rich reward. She never threw away anything she desired because of a doubt about using the means she had in her hand ; that is, she was always sure she had a right to use them.

So now she said : ' Of course Beth will go. It is very kind of you to urge it, yet I think it will be a pleasure to you also, and Beth is glad to do a kindness. When shall we come, signore ? and when can we hope to see the portrait ? Do you know,' turning to Miss Conover, ' we never have had a glimpse of it yet. The whims of artists, however, are to be considered, I suppose.'

Meantime Signor Straora was looking at Beth, still unsatisfied. He wished to have her free consent; he wished it to come from her. She understood, and smiled brightly.

‘Yes, I will come, since auntie consents. I don’t doubt it will be enjoyable; and then it is a pleasure, isn’t it, signore, to give pleasure? I am quite selfish in it, you see.’

It can hardly be expressed what this favour was to the artist. He felt it a question concerning not alone his art, not even principally that, but his most elevated happiness, an inspiration to heart, brain, and soul, such as he had never experienced before. It was not love he felt; rather that uplifted devotion which rendered Dante and Petrarch great—that choosing as the type of all perfection one woman, and worshipping none but her.

Yet Beth was only a pretty American girl with faults, and vanities, and narrownesses such as frail humanity will have; such as Beatrice herself, the

divine Beatrice, no doubt also possessed ; and she did not realise at all what had come to her ; indeed, would have considered it unheard-of arrogance to dream of it.

She had become, in fact, during this interview somewhat ashamed of having taken for granted what had not been even hinted, only felt. But it is just here a woman's responsibility lies. Bethesda was not clear-sighted in regard to the love of men. What blinded her ? She often asked herself this afterwards, but she never gained a satisfactory reply. Was it vanity ? Surely for it to be hard to realise persons loved her, was not to be vain. She saw nothing in herself worthy of love, so did not expect it. Was this vanity ? Rather, what else could it be ? The doubt implied that the bestowal of love proved the value was in herself ; whereas it is only the affluence of love, falling, like the rain upon the just and unjust, which makes any one the recipient of devotion from another. Love comes to us rather for what

we should be than what we are. But Beth did not understand this. Only loving, and feeling how the divine source of love makes it spring beyond all persons to its fountainhead, could teach her.

This is what had taught Straora, and, trembling on the brink of his delight, he felt himself incapable of remaining in her presence ; he dared not even kiss her hand, but took his hat and fled.

He returned in the evening, however, to accompany them to the opera. It was a magnificent success, and it is impossible to convey an idea of an Italian audience under the thrall of such an artistic creation as that given them of *Pocohanta* by La Cinoni. For the time being they live in the lives portrayed before them, feeling the surging music as they would their own passions, and calmed at its command as at that of a god. Nothing can equal the intoxication of holding such an audience in one's hand, and seeing it quiver with each tone and gesture.

Cinoni had the tears in her eyes as she came forward between the tenor and composer, and was greeted with a real ovation. She tried to transfer some of the applause to her companions, but they joined in it to the delight of the public. She had made its supreme success in her masterly rendering of passion and despair. They felt that nothing could express their gratitude.

As Mrs. Trescott and Miss Hamilton drove home escorted by Signor Straora, Beth leaned back in her corner, an indistinct white figure in the semi-darkness.

Presently she said :

‘Did you ever think in going to the opera, signore, that there must be many persons present who are going through stirring dramas of their own?’

‘I never did—until to-night,’ he replied, bending forward, eager to catch a glimpse of her face. But without noticing his movement she continued :

‘I wonder if each life is not set to music as much as an opera? Surely we can make it what we will, either a sublime symphony, a glorious anthem, or a requiem. Sometimes I think that if we only listened closely enough we might hear the orchestral accompaniment, and gain strength from the knowledge that discords only chord at last.’

There was a solemnity in her tone which prevented a ready reply, and in a moment or two she spoke in a more natural voice, but with an echo of passionate sadness :

‘Poor Pocohanta ! in losing her lover she lost the keynote of her existence, and all she could do was to end the distorted harmony. Death must be the result of a broken heart. But in our day no one should have a broken heart. Love is not all in the world, even for a woman ; there is something higher and greater.’

‘There is nothing so sweet,’ murmured the artist, thrown off his guard. He had listened to

her as to an oracle. She seemed miles above him ; he never thought of touching her, but his heart spoke almost unconsciously in those few words. She might require an utter sacrifice from him, but he knew its worth.

On this strained intensity of feeling Mrs. Tresscott broke with a laugh.

‘What fol-de-rol talking of dying for love ! The heart is altogether too elastic for that, isn’t it, signore ? We know better than this little romantic maiden, eh ?’

‘I doubt if we know so well,’ replied Signor Straora gravely, and to his relief they arrived at home.

CHAPTER III.

‘ Ah, the little more, and how much it is !
And the little less, and what worlds away !
How a sound shall quicken content to bliss,
Or a breath suspend the blood’s best play,
And life be a proof of this !’

ROBERT BROWNING.

THE second morning after the representation of *Pocohanta* was the one on which Beth and her aunt first returned to Signor Straora’s studio. The bright sunlight and the fresh air had banished all Beth’s ghosts, and she was in a joyous mood, dancing around her aunt with a frolicsomeness that caused Mrs. Trescott to watch her a little. Could the child be really interested in the painter ?

‘ You don’t seem particularly unhappy at the thought of sitting again,’ she remarked.

‘Not a bit of it,’ answered Beth frankly. ‘You know I dislike refusing requests more than almost anything else ; and then you are pleased now, auntie. That makes me happy.’

Mrs. Trescott pushed her reassurance a question further.

‘And Signor Straora?’

‘Oh yes ; I like to please him too. He has not had a very pleasant life, they say, and I am glad to tuck any small repugnance I may feel into my pocket for the sake of giving him something nice to think about ; and,’ with a gay smile, ‘I’m nice, auntie, am I not?’

‘You will do,’ answered Mabel, in a well-pleased voice. ‘You look about four years old this morning, and are just as much of a sunbeam as you were then. I hope you will stay my little girl for ever so many years yet, though, of course, you must marry some time.’

‘I would begin to mourn over it now, if I were in your place,’ exclaimed Beth. ‘It is the

wisest plan in this vale of tears to prepare for sorrow and never expect joy. Do cry a little about my marrying; right off, now; won't you please, auntie? Indeed, we might cry together, for it will be far more lamentable to me. Now, let's begin together. One——'

'You foolish child!' laughed Mabel. 'What nonsense you can talk! Run away and get ready. We will postpone our tears till a more propitious occasion.'

Notwithstanding this youthful exuberance of spirits Beth dressed herself very demurely in a gray gown, determined to be quite dignified; but she could not help smiling as she met her own dancing eyes in the mirror.

'I am not very ugly,' she thought, 'and I am quite content to be pretty to-day. It can't harm anybody.'

When they reached the studio building, with its sombre cypresses opposite, a shadow was cast for a moment over the sparkling eyes and bright

face. Had she any right to return here, where she might be putting sorrow into another's life, and lift through the radiant sunshine some such gloomy monument as one of these?

But Signor Straora had been on the watch for them, and now came running down to welcome his guests. There was a pleasure in his bearing (he had to hold a strong rein on himself not to show too much), which, however illogically, restored Beth's gladness of spirit.

When the door into the studio was opened Beth could not restrain an exclamation of delight. Through an immense window, from which the gray shades were drawn aside, the light was streaming in a yellow glory, and on every side it was reflected by armour and weapons, which were arranged in groups on the tapestried walls. Finely-carved guitars, flutes, and other musical instruments, were laid in artistic confusion on mosaic and ebony tables; old cabinets of ivory and sandal-wood stood against Japanese screens,

which formed odd corners, where lacquer ware and Venetian glass were mingled in incongruous harmony. The most striking object in the room was a screen crossing the whole length of the apartment, and rising almost to the frescoed ceiling. It was made of panels of deep red damask, framed in carved ebony; and, propped or hung on the protuberances of the carving, were unfinished sketches and rough outlines of heads and limbs; while all around the room, on easels and chairs, were paintings—some of weird scenery, and some of elfish figures, that peopled the room with witches.

But the completing touch, and the one that pleased Beth most, was the bright wood fire. It had never been there before.

‘I observed that you had a fire always burning,’ explained their host, ‘and I wished to make it as comfortable for you as I could.’

There could hardly have been a greater concession made by an Italian, for they prefer to shiver

over a 'scaldino' rather than to 'oppress the lungs,' as they insist a fire always does. But radical changes were being made in at least one Italian by this American girl. Mrs. Trescott wondered even if he did not intend the fire as a symbol of the warmth which had been lighted in his heart by Beth's unconscious hands.

She had gone immediately to the hearth, and stood there with one dainty foot on the fender, delighted by the scene, and permeated with the sense of pleasure from unobtrusive admiration, as well as from the blazing logs.

One brand fell forward.

'Oh,' she said quickly, 'give me the tongs. Thanks. There!' dexterously readjusting the sticks, 'you cannot be expected to know how to tend to a fire. It takes a woman to keep it from doing damage.'

He was watching her with an almost painful delight. Think of a Beatrice condescending to arrange a domestic hearth!

She looked up at him smiling and a little flushed. Instantly down fell the tongs with a clatter, and she moved away to her seat. How about the vague uneasiness, which was the utmost she had acknowledged to herself, then?

‘Please, signorina,’ said the artist from the easel in a business-like tone (he had realised his danger), ‘will you turn this way? It is essential that I should see your eyes now.’

‘Must I look at you, then, all the time?’ asked Beth, a little wickedly in spite of herself.

A quick answer flashed in Signor Straora’s eyes, but he did not give it utterance.

‘Look anywhere you choose,’ he said quietly, ‘so that it is towards me.’

‘That is my Sphinx-like expression, eh?’ she said, a little impatient at her position. ‘I wonder how you ever fancied I looked like the Sphinx anyway. Do you know, signore, it is rather a doubtful compliment? As I remember her, she had no nose, and her stony complexion

looked as if she had been visited by a gigantic smallpox.'

'It is not in those points that I trace the resemblance.'

'No ? Well, that is comforting. Didn't the Sphinx have the privilege of asking a question of every one who approached her?' she went on after a moment's pause. Someway, she could not bear silence to-day, with his hand and eyes working so swiftly. She felt all the blemishes there were in her face ; she must take her mind off it—this miserable self-consciousness !

He had hesitated before answering her. Now he said gravely : 'Yes, signorina.'

'And wasn't there some dreadful penalty attached if he did not answer ?'

'The sacrifice of his life, signorina.'

This was becoming altogether too serious.

'I can't play at any such game as that if you do call me the Sphinx,' she said lightly. 'What does the mysterious creature mean, after all, signore ?'

‘I cannot say ; I can at most only paint it.’ He stood back from the easel, surveying the work and the model critically. ‘It is your eyes that escape me. In them lies the whole secret of the expression. There is a deep question in them ; a wealth of expression—— Ah, signorina ! don’t mock at me !’

Beth’s eyes were dancing now, and she broke into a peal of hearty laughter as she exclaimed :

‘Let me translate the question for you, signore ; it is indeed deep. What do you expect to answer when you are accused of sending me to perdition by flattery ?’

‘I, flatter ? Pardon,’ he said, persistently grave. ‘I think you cannot recall a single word of even most deserved appreciation. It is too common for you.’

Beth’s gaiety was silenced by his tone. She played with the beads in her lap, a trifle embarrassed.

‘Madama,’ said the artist to Mrs. Trescott,

‘cannot you suggest something which will keep la signorina from being too much *ennuyée*?’

‘Give her a book, and let her read aloud to us. It may entertain you as well as her.’

‘I do not doubt it; but I have few books,’ he said, taking a handful from a table near by.

‘Here is a work on art; you surely will not care for that, Mees Hamiltone? Nor this on Egypt? You see I have been looking up Egyptian history to explain you. Nor this——?’

‘Let me have the Egyptian one,’ said Beth, with interest. ‘I should like myself to find out what is the explanation given of me.’

He came forward to hand it to her, but stopped suddenly.

‘No, please, not this,’ he said deprecatingly.

‘Why not?’

‘Because I—I greatly prefer not.’

‘Then there is no reason for it, signore?’ she said, instinctively trying her power over him.

‘No, it is a whim of mine,’ he answered

hastily, slipping the volume under the others. ‘This will suit you much better,’ and he offered her a collection of poems.

‘No, I don’t care for that ; I want the other. It is a whim of mine,’ she added, mimicking his deep tones with bewitching effect. ‘Please give me it.’

She held out her hand, the rosy palm upwards. It was a very little thing that she asked. Why not ? Of course the book was hers.

She opened it eagerly and glanced through the closely-printed pages, reading bits such as these :—‘The meaning of the Sphinx is the great enigma of life ; the earnest seeking after truth, which has existed in all times. It is the mystery of the unknown.’

‘And I look so wondrously mysterious, do I ?’ commented Beth, although the query in her eyes deepened in spite of her light words. They were only the foam on the surface of the sea.

“ Her figure was placed before every temple.”

You have marked that,' she said, glancing up. He was busy, and did not reply.

‘“The Sphinx has a lion’s body, with two wings, and a virgin’s head.” Poor virgin! Now, what do you suppose that means, signore?’

‘The natural and the ideal, and the intelligence which unites them.’

‘Why, there’s something in it, isn’t there?’ she exclaimed, her intellect aroused. ‘But why should it be a lion?’

‘For strength and courage. Those are the highest natural attributes.’

‘And the wings? Oh yes, I see. But is a virgin the highest in humanity?’

‘Is she not?’ he murmured very low.

Now as Beth sat there was an old copy of a Virgin over her head, and it would have been difficult to say which Signor Straora glanced at as he spoke these words. Beth remembered he was a Catholic, and explained his words quite simply.

‘Why didn’t you wish me to see this?’ she asked presently, closing the book. ‘I don’t see what troubled you.’

‘I thought you would not find it interesting,’ he answered in a relieved tone, but he incautiously showed a desire to regain it.

‘No, there is something I haven’t found!’ she exclaimed. ‘Go to your easel, signore; you cannot have it yet.’

She turned over a few pages carelessly, not really expecting to find anything, when her eye caught sight of a fine annotation, and heavy marks around a certain passage.

If she had read it she would have known with what exceeding reverence and devotion he regarded her; and the artist had been afraid it would rob him of his sittings. Moreover, he could not have her see it when she was in such a mood.

But of course she did not think of reading a word. She half closed the book, and said triumphantly :

‘I have it!’

He took a long stride towards her.

‘Signorina, you will give it to me?’ His tone made it almost a command, and this made her defiant. She folded her hands over it.

‘You gave it to me, signore.’

For a moment they were both silent, her clear eyes encountering his with a curious expression of mingled fire, determination, and experiment.

‘He shall not have the book,’ she was thinking; ‘but he ought to make me give it to him.’

He half recognised the only way to cope with her was in placing entire confidence in her, but the impatience which so often foils victory—perhaps also his intense desire to prove to himself some influence over her—seized him then.

‘Signora,’ he repeated, ‘you will give me that book.’

‘Are you quite sure?’ she returned, smiling.

‘Yes,’ he said; but Beth now detected a slight wavering in his tone.

‘Why should I?’ she asked.

‘Because I desire it.’

‘Are your desires usually so important to me?’ she exclaimed haughtily.

‘They shall be—in this instance!’ he replied with a fierce catch in his voice.

‘Ah?’

She met his eyes again with dauntless resolution. It was a curious sight to see, this dainty, seated maiden defying with calm coolness the fiery-souled man who stood before her.

There was a moment’s silence. Mrs. Trescott had dropped her work, and was watching with interest.

‘He must conquer now or never,’ she thought.

His burning eyes plunged into his opponent’s, and recognised there a superior strength. This woman possessed a power he could not thwart. Her indomitable spirit paralysed him, while raising his admiration, his passion, to a dizzy height.

He dared no longer look at her. Without a

word he ground his heel on the marble floor, and, turning, left her.

Beth drew a long breath, and laid the book on the table. She leaned back in her chair then, her eyes brilliant as two stars, triumph and regret mingling strangely.

‘What a disturbance over nothing!’ exclaimed Mrs. Trescott, laughing. ‘You might a great deal better have taken my advice and read the poems, Beth. But here is your book, signore, and you had better make use of your model while you can.’

Signor Straora did not answer. He had gone quite to the other end of the room, and was hidden by a screen.

Beth was already regretting her impulsive action. She did not blame herself for measuring lances, when it once came to battle, but she wished she had avoided the cause.

‘I came to give him a pleasure, and I have annoyed him instead,’ she thought.

As he walked slowly towards her he saw the wistful expression on her face. His own was what the French call *morne*.

‘Signora,’ he said, stopping at some little distance from her, ‘I cannot ask your pardon. I am not worthy of your favour.’ He took the book and laid it on the red coals. ‘That, at least, will not come between us more.’

Beth sprang up to rescue the book instinctively, but it was too late. The blue flames shrivelled and curled the binding ; then crept in among the leaves, and burst forth into a bright conflagration.

Beth drew a step nearer. ‘I beg your pardon,’ she said earnestly. ‘I am grieved to make you lose your book.’

‘It is not the book,’ he murmured. Then, aloud : ‘You have nothing to regret, nor any pardon to ask. Indeed, that would be impossible from you to me.’ He stopped. The gray ashes were whirling up the chimney.

‘Addio!’ he whispered, in an echo of passionate accents.

Beth was awed by his manner. She was silent and motionless. How she wished she had never returned!

Presently he moved a little towards her, and, with downcast eyes, began speaking rapidly:

‘Madonna, you do not know what you have been to me; what you are, and always will be. Nothing can rob me of you. I am as sure of you as of God’s saints—as of our Blessed Lady.’ He paused, and his eyes now wandered with a despairing intensity over the lovely features, the tremulous mouth, and drooping lids of deep-set eyes.

‘I am going away,’ he went on. ‘I am not worthy to be near you. I would gladly be the marble beneath your feet, to thrill with pleasure when you pressed it. But, I am not marble, and—I go away. Don’t try to answer me. I know all you would say. Your face has become

the best-known page in life to me. You cannot conceal what you think ; and yet, I never can read deep enough.'

The fluttering flush that came and went on her cheeks, the distress, the poignant regret, warned him he must not prolong his last study of this dearest face.

He bent before her, and took her two hands in his.

'Remember, I thank you,' he said, 'and I leave you.'

He pressed one and the other hand to his lips.

'Addio, madonna mia.'

Not daring to trust himself further, he bowed to Mrs. Trescott and left the room.

'What on earth does all this mean?' exclaimed Mabel. She had not overheard the low quick words.

'It means that we are to go. Come quick, auntie.'

'You are the most incomprehensible couple!'

said Mrs. Trescott, but she put on her hat and cloak.

When they were going downstairs Beth cried in an undertone :

‘It is my fault, my fault ! I ought never to have come back !’

Mabel’s answer was an incredulous shrug of the shoulders.

‘Now tell me what all this fuss is about,’ she said, as they entered the carriage.

‘Oh, I can’t !’ said Beth in a choked voice. She had caught a glimpse of the cypresses, and these stirred recollections which made her self-reproach still more cutting.

‘Pshaw !’ said Mrs. Trescott, suddenly wise. ‘Don’t make so much of it, child. He’ll get over his sweet trouble soon enough. A little love hurts no man. Each one thinks his heart is broken, of course, when the self-conceit is flattened out of it ; but it is a very elastic contrivance, which soon puffs out again. Don’t worry.’

Beth hardly heard her. 'I have done wrong, wrong,' she was saying to herself. 'I wish I were ugly and hateful. I don't see why persons like me—— I am not worthy of it,—and I have hurt him so !'

It showed the difference between the two. These little things made the 'divide.' Streams whose springs were close together would, as they increased, empty into different seas.

In the evening a letter was handed Mrs. Trescott from the artist. He thanked them for their great kindness, and told them he was obliged to leave the city for an indefinite period. He ended the short note with these words :—

'You have given me the purest and noblest hours of my existence, and whatever the future may bring, believe that the inspiration contained in them will not stop with this world. If at any time my life can be of service to you, command it.—Devotedly yours,

'ALBERTO STRAORA DI ALBANA.'

CHAPTER IV.

‘ They fail, and they alone, who have not striven.’

J. B. ALDRICH.

‘ Thine eyes, too wise, are heavy with the dole,
The doubt, the dread, of all this human maze.’

R. W. GILDER.

It was the end of February ; a day deepened in beauty from the one on which Bethesda had lain on the sod in the garden, and afterwards had consented to return to Signor Straora’s studio ; but the air was only more deliciously soft, the tenderness of the landscape but more articulate, and Bethesda a little lovelier. A month could not pass with her now, any more than with the spring, and not leave its slow, sweet traces. It begins early in Italy, but only reaches perfection there, as elsewhere, in the midst of June roses.

Bethesda was waiting now outside the English bank, where her aunt had gone for letters. The old Florentine palace, thus desecrated, towered majestically into the sunshine, and formed a rugged background to the varied life of the street; and the lounging idlers, the busy hucksters, the crippled beggars, and energetic foreigners, all turned to give at least a second glance at the dainty figure seated in the little phaeton.

She would have been surprised had she known how many, who were entire strangers, were well acquainted with her habits, and looked for her passing as something worth watching for. She was one of those women whose faces grow more beautiful as they become familiar, and which do not need a voice to speak. The simple discerning Italians pointed her out to one another with real affection, and called her: Our lovely lady.

She found this morning the glances she attracted somewhat embarrassing at last, and

exclaimed joyfully when Mrs. Trescott appeared, a packet of letters in her hand,—

‘Isn’t it delightful to have such a big mail?’ she said. ‘Who is that thick one of yours from? Aunt Agatha? Couldn’t we break our rule just for to-day, and glance over some of these now?’

‘No, Beth, don’t. Trouble will come quick enough any way. There’s something wrong in those letters. Oh, I know it. You needn’t argue with me. I have had a spell without any trouble, and now it’s bound to come; so let us enjoy our drive while we can.’

‘As you like, dear. Presentiments can only be met by proving there is nothing in them, or else by making up one’s mind to meet whatever may come bravely; but——’

‘You needn’t preach to me. Try and make me forget it rather. That is the best you can do.’

It was again an example of their difference. She had tried to give what she sought on that

day in December: a strengthening in view of some calamity. But she was finding out that it is not by any means an infallible rule to do as one would be done by. Some natures are diametrically opposed: what is kind to one is cruel to the other.

She made an effort, therefore, to do as her aunt had done by her; talked to her cheerily and entertainingly, and was rewarded by the gloom lifting somewhat from Mrs. Trescott's face.

During this they passed the Porta Romana, and followed the road which wound upwards in easy curves, bordered by trees which cast young shadows across the wide walks and gardens, that filled in the interstices of the doubling carriage-way. On either side ancient and modern villas rose, among shimmering olive groves, whose leaves stirred in the sunny air, and caught lights never twice the same.

‘Does this ever cease to be a surprise?’ said Beth. ‘Day after day we come by here, and

still it is always new, always an unexpected foretaste of the pleasure we know is beyond.'

'Dear Italy!' exclaimed Mabel, throwing a kiss to the landscape with her usual extravagance. 'Who cares for presentiments while we can breathe this air, and smell this fragrance, and look at this view, and, in short, drive around the Via dei Colli!'

'Here is the field where we gathered wild-flowers last year; don't you want to try now?'

'Yes, that will be charming.'

A moment later they were pushing their way through a wild hedge, and, amidst the sprouting grain, along the fringed edges of the field, delightedly espied hyacinths and harebells, violets and anemones, and the voluptuous narcissi, passionate as a southern beauty.

After the first exclamations they gathered the blossoms in silence, except for a cry now and then from Mabel. Nature's unseen incense, rising around them, seemed to have permeated Beth,

for when she joined Mabel at last her liquid eyes were eloquent of mysteries half revealed, of truths whose fragrance came to her as the flower-scents did. What was it about odours being like the prayers of saints?

‘Just see these narcissi,’ she said. ‘Aren’t thick white blossoms intense beyond all the coloured flowers? It is surely the white heat, which seems cool from its very excess.’

‘Ugh! they’re suffocating!’ exclaimed Mabel, pushing them away, and hurrying to the carriage. ‘Come; it’s horribly hot in the sun.’

The coachman stopped again on the top of the hill, without waiting to be told. Often the ladies sat here for half an hour, at the base of the great bronze David, with the cypresses of San Miniato piercing the deep purple sky, like a reticent question, behind them.

Beneath lay the most beautiful valley and city in the world. There were the narrow, irregular streets of the old town, and the house-covered,

bridges, under which ran the yellow Arno, now filled by snow gathered from the spring-touched Apennines. Across the river statued palaces extended their porticoes to the river's edge, and beyond lay the mass of merchant houses, surmounted at close intervals by domes and spires, uplifting high into the violet air the holy, golden cross.

As they sat there, from a hundred towers rang forth the bells, announcing the hour of noon, the twelfth hour which combines those of all the apostles ; and as the mellow chimes died away in the purple shadows of the hills, the silence brought an indescribable sensation of listening angels bending over the city in a radiance so bright that they could not be seen.

Involuntarily following the echoing sounds Beth's eyes wandered off over the far distance, where the exquisitely shaded mountains fell back to give place to the sea-like valley ; and the peaks of Carrara lifted high their snowy heads above

the hearts where lie untold beauties of future statues. Beyond these there was only the sky, —the heavens—that is all. But the mighty light made this blue too glorious for human eyes, so they fell, and followed back again the billowy mountains, rising and sinking in the wondrous atmosphere, bearing castles and peasant homes alike upon their bosoms, to the gray walls of Fiesole.

Over the face of Bethesda, as she gazed, swept the expression of many unuttered, uncomprehended thoughts. The beauty oppressed while it exalted her. She felt wide wings unfold themselves to bear her up, and her body held her down. She would have liked to be the life in the earth, the warmth in the air, the light in the sun ; anything great and impersonal, which would satisfy this strange yearning within her, that seemed infinite in its capacity, and would not be subdued.

‘Gracious, child ! What *are* you thinking about ?’

Beth started sensitively, and turned back to the carriage. She could not try to talk any more. She felt hushed, yet thrilled, as if breathing in the silence before a voice should speak.

Mabel's heavy depression closed in upon them both as they drove home, where the letters must soon be read. Mrs. Trescott did not care to make an effort to diminish its effect.

‘What is the good?’ she said, when Beth tried to rouse her. ‘It's only one thing more, and life has not been so easy to me thus far that I should expect anything but trouble in the future. It has been hard, hard; motherless, homeless, childless, a widow and an exile;—and now—who knows what worse is coming?’

She looked with dislike on the packet bearing the handwriting usually so warmly welcomed.

‘How grieved Aunt Agatha and Margaret would be to have their letters meet with such a reception!’ said Beth; and then, seeing it useless to say more, and perhaps a little of the weight of

Mabel's gloom falling on her too, they drove the rest of the way in silence.

Her shadowy room looked very calm and restful to the girl after the warm drive and oppressive mental atmosphere. She let herself drop on the lounge, and lay there a few moments in utter lassitude. Then she roused herself with a start.

‘Bah! it is better to bring down the sword of Damocles on one’s devoted head than fear what may not exist.’

She tore open one of the envelopes bearing her sister’s handwriting. It commenced abruptly :—

‘Father is ill, very ill. They say he will not live. Miss Sink is nursing him. If it were not for that I should go to him. Aunt Agatha kindly said she would go with me, if I wished it, but I told her no. Was I right? Would you have done the same? Our lawyer is to keep us posted. If father asks for us, for either of us, of course I will start at once.’

The rest of the letter, about other things,

Beth read without understanding. It was appalling, someway, to be so far off, and not aware whether her father, now, was alive or dead.

She had known him but very little. His wife had died at her birth, and he had separated himself almost entirely from his children, leaving them in the care of their young aunts, who had been brought up by his wife, and were then unmarried. His life was of a description which made him feel less uneasy away from the innocent eyes of his children and the wiser ones of their protectors. He had a large fortune, and was liberal with it, so that he was quite willing to give a generous allowance to 'the girls' for the care of their little nieces. When Agatha married, the two were left under Mabel's charge; but later, after her own romantic marriage to a lover upon his deathbed, Mr. Hamilton showed some desire to regain control of his children. At first it was looked upon as a hopeful sign, then recognised as only a deeper step into evil.

He was no longer ashamed. Mabel now saw her opportunity of fulfilling a lifelong wish and going abroad. Every year made it more dangerous for the children, as long as they were under age. There was 'a scene' with Mr. Hamilton—a power which Mrs. Trescott had always held over the man, lashing him with her sarcasm and bitter invectives, like a second Queen Margaret, and he could not walk on, regardless of the stinging scorpions, like another Richard. So she had her way. She shook with energy the dust of America from her feet, glad to leave all old associations and begin life anew.

It was a new life, at all events, for in the first year she heard of the death of Milton Eglamore, the one man she had loved, and who had broken their engagement for some trifling cause. This had been the real reason of her hasty marriage. She wanted to put something between her and the memory of her 'dastard' lover. It had hardly been successful. As long as there was

life there was hope. When this went out, however, after the first shock, the rich widow became more lively and dashing than ever. She called herself 'an exile' at times, but in reality she liked Europe. It would be a trial to her to give it up. Margaret had gone home as soon as she was of age to live with Agatha Stanhope, and presently Beth would be of age too. She could return then also, but Mrs. Trescott did not eagerly anticipate that repeal of the decree of banishment. In any case there was a year more, and who knew what might not happen in a year?

Beth knew the facts of all this; she surmised, perhaps, the feelings. She had been brought up in the knowledge of more of the darker side in life than most women of her class and years. It had perhaps given her her earnestness and yearning to do right; but she had little to steady her. Now, looking out into this life from which her own had sprung, seeing it on the verge of the

unknown and awful future, she shrank back appalled.

Presently, however, she opened another letter of later date.

‘We received a telegram to-day,’ it said. ‘Father died last night quite easily, and seemingly content. He never mentioned either of us. When Mr. Simpson asked him at last if he should not send for me, “No,” he said; “the will is right; the will is right.” That was all. Uncle Raleigh goes on to-night to be present at the reading of the will.’

Beth dropped the paper, and sat looking out with unseeing eyes on the swaying branches and blue sky visible through the lattice.

Could it be that her *father* was dead and she felt no more? Oh, the sadness of it, the bitter sadness, that she could not grieve for him! She would have done much to have helped him. It had been a dream all her life that some time she might be of service to him. She had thought of

his old age, and his daughters caring for him. And this was the end—this was all.

Hark! what was that? It sounded like a sob. Yes, and there was another. In an instant Beth had unfastened the door into Mrs. Trescott's room and had sprung to Mabel's side. She was sitting by a table, her face hidden, and was crying violently.

‘Dear heart, what is the matter?’ Beth exclaimed, while she knelt and put her arm around the quivering figure.

There was no answer but an acceleration of sobs at the caressing touch, and a gradual subsidence of them as the sympathetic silence calmed and healed. At last Mabel put the letter which had caused the outburst into Beth's hand, indicating with a gesture for her to read it in her own room.

Bethesda did as she was bidden. The letter was one from Agatha. It was later than either of Margaret's, and told of Mr. Stanhope's return.

Mr. Hamilton's will had been read, and was found to leave his property to his daughters, half and half. Mrs. Trescott and Mr. Stanhope were left joint guardians. There was no word of regret or affection, but his acts had spoken well for his feelings towards his children. He had no wish to rob them of what was rightfully theirs.

‘You can come home now without fear,’ continued Agatha, ‘and I am sure you must be anxious to do so. It is undoubtedly your duty. The girls both need what they have never had—a home which they feel to be permanent. You will be happier in one yourself. Besides, here are all these business affairs to settle in which you and Raleigh are equally concerned; and Raleigh’s care of your own money was first proposed for two years only, and under a pressure of circumstances now removed. He is still willing to do all the work, but he wishes you to share the responsibility.’

I hope you will come home as early as possible and settle near us. There is a pretty house whose grounds adjoin ours which is now for sale. Margaret and I think it would just suit you all. I remember Beth admired it when she was here. I have asked them to hold it until I hear from you.

‘Is our girlish intercourse to be renewed in happier surroundings? And shall we enjoy together seeing our nieces develop and mature?’

Could it be this which had caused Mrs. Trescott’s passionate outburst? Yes, Beth could see how it appeared to her aunt. She was suddenly asked—perhaps she might even think coerced—to give up Europe, in whose free life Beth knew she delighted. She was accountable to nobody but herself here; she could do as she chose; she need not look at the serious side of things any more than it pleased her. Over there it would be quite different. Beth had keenly recognised this during her visit to America. She could feel

how the hampering of family consultations would chafe her aunt, accustomed to having her own will an unquestioned law. But there was the affection, the stability, the home life ! Yet these would not compensate to her aunt, she knew. Change, travel, and society had taken their place. Thoughts had given way to things. It was all a pleasant, outward life here ; there it was earnest and thoughtful.

It would be a trial to Aunt Mabel, but it must be done, decided Beth. Her own heart yearned for her sister and aunt. For America ? Well, no, she could not truthfully say that. She liked Europe too. It was more homelike to her than America. They might come back again for a visit some time. Now it was their duty, as Aunt Agatha said, to make a home.

But Aunt Mabel must not be forced in any sense. She must take her own way. This house in S——. It was a rare chance, but if Aunt Mabel felt badly about it, it must be given up,

for to take it would be a continual misery to her. America was large; they might settle anywhere; but anywhere out of S——: it would have to be these two alone. Margaret would not feel it right to leave the Stanhopes. Still, Beth was willing. She could not have her aunt, who had done so much for her, unhappy.

The troubles she foresaw worried the girl, and yet whenever there came a lull in her thoughts these things sank into insignificance within the terrible silence of her father's unloved death. Where was he now? What did he know now? And the darkness and the sense of vastness crushed her.

CHAPTER V.

‘Men, at some time, are masters of their fates.’

JULIUS CÆSAR.

WHILE Bethesda was still thinking a knock came at the door, and a telegram was handed her. Rendered fearful by the unwonted emotions of the day, the yellow envelope caused her a momentary chill, and she tore it open hastily to end suspense.

It was in French, which relieved her fears, but surprised her.

‘Hope to be in Florence Thursday, only for a few hours. May I see you in the evening? I entreat assent. Will await your answer.—
RENÉ D’ISTEN.’

‘How very peculiar!’ exclaimed Beth, her sensitive lips gathering a little scorn.

She took the missive immediately to her aunt, who was writing, and looked up with hot angry eyes.

‘Nothing is the matter, auntie,’ said the girl; ‘it is only a telegram from your friend M. d’Isten.’

‘Impossible!’ exclaimed Mabel, surprised into forgetfulness of her troubles.

While she read Beth watched, and saw it did indeed change the current of her aunt’s mind. She half smiled as she laid it down.

‘At least he is not timid,’ she said.

‘Rather audacious, I should say. Excuse me for opening it. I did so by mistake. The boy is waiting.’

‘Shall I answer it?’ asked Mrs. Trescott undecidedly.

‘I cannot say,’ answered Beth in a reticent tone. ‘That is a question no one but you can decide.’

‘It seems as if I ought, when he says he will

wait for it. But I can't think very well,' she said, putting her hand to her head pitifully. 'Do tell me what to do.'

'How can I say, auntie dear? You must remember I know nothing of how you stand. Weren't you offended with him? Do you wish to see him?'

'The last I heard from him,' said Mrs. Trescott evasively, 'he assured me I had entirely misunderstood him. He was sure if we met he could convince me. Of course he couldn't; but then, it looks as if he had some excuse to telegraph this, doesn't it?'

'Do you wish to hear the excuse? That is the only question. If you think it is a matter which cannot be explained, there is no use in seeing him. If you consider it may be a mere misunderstanding, why, let him come.'

'Then you advise his coming?'

'No, I don't advise anything. I know nothing about it, remember.'

‘I think I will give him the opportunity, and see what he makes of it,’ decided Mabel after a moment’s thought. ‘I used to like him very much, and it is pleasant to have warm friends; never pleasanter than when your relatives are treating you harshly.’

The bitter look came again in her face as she turned to her portfolio.

‘How shall I word it?’ she asked, with an appealing glance from abused eyes.

‘Why don’t you say clearly it is for an explanation?’

‘How can I? Here, you write it. My head is in a whirl.’

She rose and threw herself on the sofa, while Beth quickly wrote:—

‘Madame Trescott will receive Monsieur d’Isten if he thinks himself authorised to call.’

She read it aloud.

‘It is surely cold enough, but better so perhaps. And now tell me,’ she added, when

Beth had despatched the boy, 'what do you think of Agatha's letter?'

'I think you had better simply tell her now that you won't take the house, and decide the rest later. You were writing to her?'

'Yes; but I did not say that.'

'Will you let me add it, then, and take the letter?' asked Beth very gently. She saw her aunt's eyes filling again, and would have liked to spare her. Somehow to-day she was trying to do her best actively, with a stealthy sense of unreality beneath.

'You are quite sure you don't want the house?' said Mabel, ready to sob again.

'Not unless you wish it, auntie dear.'

'You know I would be utterly wretched there!' cried Mabel, flashing forth a moment. 'A western town!—And right after Europe!—It is cruel to propose such a thing—I thought Agatha knew—knew, and cared for—me—more.'

'Let me add that you won't take the house,'

said Beth. 'That is decided. No one, dear auntie, wants you to go where you will be unhappy.'

'I don't know,' said Mrs. Trescott, between her sobs; 'but—we can take another house—later—if you—want to.'

'I sha'n't want one until you do, rest assured,' said Beth in a cheery tone; and then she hurriedly added a few words to the angry pages, and took the letter away, promising herself not to mail it, but keep it quietly until the next day. Mabel might regret some of the harsh things she had said by that time. Beth did not yet understand that for Mrs. Trescott to regret anything sufficiently to wish to take it back would be to shatter the whole fabric of her character.

In the rich luxurious room to which Beth now returned a very Cleopatra in variability was lying on the lounge, ready to burst into tears again, or to be coaxed into smiles.

Beth did not excite either. At such a time her tenderness was especially healing. And now, as she stood at the head of the couch, and smoothed the burning forehead, not speaking a word, but covering Mabel with the shelter of her care, she soothed her almost to sleep.

Finally she left her on tiptoe, and went into her own room, and put on her white wrapper, and bathed her face. What a full day it had been, and how tired she was !

But she must write a few words of explanation to Aunt Agatha, and thank Uncle Raleigh, and say a little something to Margaret, her only sister ; the two orphans now together.

She had just finished when a well-known knock came at the door, and Beth hastened to open it, feeling especially glad to see Evra, now that she was sore at heart, and impotent to disentangle the threads of love which seemed to be tying themselves in a hard knot around her.

The keen ear of the artist instantly detected

the quiver of sorrow and fatigue, however, and Beth's face was worn, for she was one on whom worry told more than much physical pain.

‘What is the matter, dearest?’ exclaimed Evra, throwing aside a choice cluster of lilies and roses to take Beth's hands in both hers.

‘We have had letters——’

‘Letters?’ interrupted Evra, as she saw it was hard for Beth to speak. ‘I know what that is! And they have been hurting my Lily? It's cruel!’

‘It's not me, Evra; and it could not be helped. But—O Evra! my father is dead.’

Then the tired heart broke down, and she buried her face in Evra's breast and cried miserably.

The artist held her with the utmost tenderness, saying many endearing things, and, with ready comprehension, trying to strengthen rather than soothe her.

‘I am ashamed,’ said Beth presently. ‘It

was foolish in me to break down so. You must not think it is only my father's death,' she added, sensitive to the least suspicion of hypocrisy. 'We have seen nothing of him for years, and I hardly knew him. It was the shock, I suppose, and auntie's being quite upset by some plans. They wish us to go home as soon as possible, and auntie feels badly about it. I have been trying to help her, and never thought of crying until I saw you.'

'Because you knew I would understand, cara. It has worn you out, supporting your aunt. It's a shame for one so delicate to be tried so. Don't bother about the flowers now. Come, lie down here, and let me sit beside you. Your hands are burning, child. This will never do. I shall carry you off, and keep all trouble from you. If I only could, dear!'

She made Beth lie down, and covered her with a shawl, petting her like a baby.

'Now, you are not to say a word, mind. Just

give me your hand. Such dainty fingers !' She went on in an undertone to keep Beth quiet : ' Feeling fingers, too ; if I were ill, or sad, I know these could charm my trouble all away. Persons have such different hands. Mine, now ; they are large, and not a bit pretty, but I can feel, can see, with them as though each finger had an eye. If I were blind, I think I could almost tell the colour of your little roseleaf hands. Ah, don't snatch it away so, dear ! Well, if you insist, I shall just lay my head here, and we will be quite still.'

A few moments passed silently ; Beth's eyes were closed, with that strained look which shows they have difficulty in closing. There were heavy shadows beneath, and her cheeks were pallid.

While Evra was watching her anxiously the large eyes suddenly opened.

' I think I hear auntie moving,' she said, half rising. ' I must go and see if I can do anything for her.'

‘You shall keep quiet, my dear,’ remarked Evra firmly. ‘She probably isn’t a quarter so much used up as you are. I will go. I will give her some of your flowers.’

Mrs. Trescott was dressing languidly with a dark shadow on her face. She paid little attention to what Evra said, although she took the flowers with faint thanks.

‘I am very sorry you are in trouble,’ continued Evra. ‘Is there anything I can do to help you throw off the blues? Come to dine with us, will you? Mother will be delighted, and it will seem pleasanter than for you two to be staying here alone. Will you?’

‘Does Beth want to go?’

‘I don’t know. Will you, if she does? She is used up entirely, poor child,’ she added in a low tone. ‘She needs something to take her mind off.’

‘Well, I don’t care what I do. It makes little difference where I am. You must excuse my lack of cordiality, but you see——’

‘Oh yes ; I understand. And now, Lily,’ returning to the other room, ‘what do you say ? Will you take dinner with us ? It will make it easier for you, dearest,’ she said, bending to kiss the smooth white brow.

‘It is very good of you ; I am afraid we will be poor company. But I should like to go, if you don’t mind.’

‘Well, I do mind, decidedly ! I would like to have you every hour of the twenty-four, and every day of the week. Now, what can I do for you ? Your conscience is quieted, for Mrs. Trescott has shut the door, and you are to let me serve you. You are to give me the pleasure of doing something for one I love.’

‘Sing to me, then.’

Sitting there by Beth’s lounge, on a lowly tabouret, the great artist sang ballad after ballad, and lullabies ; and at last, by some secret attraction, sacred songs, full of strength and richness.

Bethesda was soon entranced beyond all thought of worry. Music was a real potency in her life, and she was quickly attuned to harmony. Now she thought, with a hushed wonder, of how intricately the hope of redeeming her father was woven into all her own musical studies. And now—now—*was* this all she would ever know of fatherhood?

The glorious voice soared, and lifted her on its strong wings. She felt there must be something more. For is there any art which expresses religion so well as music? The craving, the aspiration, the harmony, the insubstantiality which comes so near being pure spirituality,—what is more like religion? A keynote found and held is necessary to all harmony. Then the innumerable chords, the notes so distant, yet the same; the sounds that come, perhaps, from wooden keys, and end—who knows where?—are combined, multiplied, reproduced, in a true order, which allows of no discord, and which are merged

into the eternal symphony of creation, by the sure triumph of a great and patient musician.

Who with an ear for music can wonder that Saint Cecilia should have heard the continuation of her strains, and believed they were from heaven?

Evra looked up finally, and found Bethesda lying in the twilight, her eyes shining, and solemn, and tender.

‘My darling!’ she exclaimed, putting her hand upon her almost as if to hold her down.

‘Yes, dear,’ said Beth softly, ‘your singing has done me much good. It has taken all the soreness out of my heart. You are very good to me.’

‘*I good to you!* Well, that is a way! But now I must go home. I have to announce your arrival to mamma. Come soon, won’t you, dearest?’

CHAPTER VI.

‘To depict such a character is like trying to catch a meteor and make it sit for its picture.’—MRS. JAMESON.

To fertilise an arid grief, one must strike deep, even to the waters of truth, which underlie all lives as streams underlie all lands.

DURING the next few days there were many talks between Mrs. Trescott and Beth, which were both exciting and exhausting ; for Mrs. Trescott was a very tempest of emotion, and dissolved in a torrent of tears, or fired into furious anger, according as she felt herself more abused or insulted. Mrs. Stanhope had no right to dictate to her, bid her stay, or call her home, as if she were a puppet ! She could judge for herself. She wouldn’t go home until she chose. The trail of the serpent was over all America now ;

she could not *bear* to think of returning ! And then tears again.

The truth was, that the imperceptible release of self-control during the careless life she had led of late had crept within. Superficial treatment cures no disease ; it but forces it inward to work destruction on the vital organs. Her desire to find pleasure in exterior things, so that she might forget the hollowness beneath, took from her interior strength. Beth, perhaps, had been the one link which had bound her to her old life ; the one, at least, that she could not ignore. Yet Beth was the reason, or the excuse, of their staying abroad, and when it was taken away Mabel collapsed, and felt the cruelty of her own emptiness. Now came the revenge of unused energies, of crushed capacities ; now she began to poignantly feel that there was a lack somewhere, and she laid it on the first thing that came to hand, and believed her sorrow all to arise from the unkindness of her friends.

Numerous plans were, of course, canvassed. Mrs. Trescott unwillingly admitted the necessity of returning home during the summer, but she set the time in July, because then the Stanhopes would probably be at the seaside, and she would feel more "independent," where they met on equal ground, than when visiting at their house. What the ultimate decision about settling would be was vague as a summer wind. Mabel did not wish to give up Mr. Stanhope as manager of her affairs, for he was a man of the strictest integrity and admirable business capacity; but at the same time she was violently opposed to sacrificing any of her own inclinations in order to retain him. Beth advised her taking the money into her own care, and settling wherever she chose; but Mabel would not listen to this.

'I cannot manage money affairs, and you know it. I should lose it all. I must have my money safe; but my letting him do that for me does not mean that I am going to slavishly sub-

mit to whatever he dictates. It is ungenerous to take such advantage of a woman.'

The matter was a weary treadmill of reiterated assertions, questions, and lamentations; and Beth was completely at a loss as to what was best to be done. In lieu of anything better, she came to look upon the anticipated arrival of M. d'Isten as a relief. Her aunt was morbid, and perhaps she would recover her usual tone if her thoughts were transferred from herself to another for even a short space.

Beth's conscience, however, was not thoroughly easy about her part in bringing to pass this meeting. She knew her aunt was given to imprudent confidences, and Aunt Agatha had said when her sister had first written enthusiastically of M. d'Isten :

'Mabel gains less knowledge from experience than any person I ever knew. At her age she ought to be wiser than to accept these Platonic friendships, which may end well, and may not,—probably not.'

Beth herself had not been at all prepossessed in the fine gentleman's favour, yet now she found herself almost glad he was coming. The present always in these days seemed the imperative thing to Bethesda.

Mrs. Trescott, on the other hand, was half sorry she had allowed him the privilege of seeing her, and looked forward to it as another wear and tear on her poor nerves, to which she was hardly equal.

'Supposing I tell you about it, and let him try and explain to you,' she even went so far as to say; but Beth stopped her right there.

'I could not think of that, Aunt Mabel; you know it would not be right. On the contrary, I am going down to Evra's to-night.'

'You sha'n't do any such thing!' asserted Mrs. Trescott imperiously.

'Wait a minute until I tell you why,' said Beth, smiling a little at the sudden explosion. 'If you are going to have an explanation with

M. d'Isten, I would be entirely *de trop*, and it would be awkward for all if I went away then.'

'You won't be *de trop*. I told him at the very beginning of our acquaintance that I didn't choose to have secrets. We can speak as easily before you as not. He will think you know all.'

'But since you have chosen to keep me in ignorance,' said Beth quietly, 'I cannot consent to play a false part. I know nothing about your misunderstanding——'

'It wasn't a misunderstanding; it was an insult.'

'And you are going to receive him, Aunt Mabel! However, as I was saying, I know nothing about it, and you might speak easily before me, but he would not. Since you are going to allow him to explain, it is mere justice to let him have a fair opportunity. He would know that I was criticising him, and it could not help but be awkward.'

‘Suppose you consider my feelings a little, instead of his altogether,’ exclaimed Mabel testily.

Beth’s eyes flashed, but she only said :

‘So I do, in going away.’

‘You entirely mistake what the explanation will be,’ said Mrs. Trescott in a less offensive tone, as she saw Beth’s resolution. ‘There isn’t a chance of his justifying himself, or making an adequate apology. At the most it will only be that we shall not remain angry,—although I don’t even see how that can be.’

‘I will come back early, so as to relieve you if you need it.’

‘Then you are set upon going to Evra’s?’

‘If you please ; for the first hour or so.’

‘You always have your own way,’ said Mabel, in a martyred tone. ‘Of course you will do as you like.’

Beth found it very hard to do anything which would please her aunt these days. The only way

she could hold herself at all upright was to think well before she spoke, and then not flinch from her decision. Her instinct was to veer with the desires of those around her, but it is impossible for a character of any consistency to adapt itself to the exigencies of a radically inconsistent nature ; and this Beth was discovering.

Mrs. Trescott was looking particularly handsome when Beth left her. She had gone over the causes for offence which this man had given her until her anger was newly aroused, and she was prepared to meet him with biting frigidity. There was an extra pride in her carriage, and a brilliance to her eyes, which made Beth remember that one of her admirers had said he always made it a point to anger her occasionally, for the pleasure of studying her in a fury. Beth could recall twenty times at least, when just such a scene as this had been prepared because of some trifling circumstance which Mrs. Trescott had construed into a lack of respect. This was her

most sensitive point. With tact, and constant remembrance of this peculiarity, one could coax or lead her unawares further than she knew; but, touch her sense of self-esteem by carelessness or intent, and she was instantly a-fire to avenge the insult. Only through appealing to her strong emotional temperament could such an error be retrieved, and even then the offence was not extinguished, but rather smouldered, ready to leap into flame if the slightest fault uncovered it.

Beth found Evra alone, and was greeted with the utmost delight.

‘I shall always like this stranger for sending you to me this evening,’ she said. ‘Mamma has gone off to take a nap, and we can have the cosiest time! But where did the man drop from? Paris? Well, they will have a fine time making up their quarrel. I don’t think anybody would find it easy to approach Mrs. Trescott when she was vexed. And one never is quite

sure of her. There are few one is. You are a rare pearl; I would trust you with anything, and know you would be my friend, sure and true, through it all.'

'If I once believe, it is very hard for me to mistrust,' replied Beth gravely. 'I think you can rely upon me.'

'And I know I can.'

Evra was in an unusually entertaining mood that evening, and diversified her stories with snatches of new songs, which made the time fly. At last, to Beth's dismay, she heard the clock strike half-past ten. She sprang up, really annoyed at her thoughtlessness.

'I said I would be home early,' she exclaimed. 'It is too bad; I ought not to have stayed so long.'

She threw her Algerian wrap around her as she spoke, and drew the hood over her head.

'You look like a white penitent in that,' said Evra. 'Don't grieve, dear. Mrs. Trescott has had her time occupied, I venture.'

‘Perhaps, but I ought not to have forgotten,’ replied Beth, in a tone that made Evra exclaim :

‘Well, you are an exemplary child, and it shows your good heart, so I won’t say a word more. Good-night.’

Beth told the coachman to drive fast, and when they reached the house she ran upstairs swiftly, but stopped a moment at the door to regain her breath.

Not a sound was to be heard within, and, fearful that the stranger had gone, which would make her delinquency seem worse, she pushed open the door quickly.

A tall man, with a proud, dark head, was leaning against the mantel, half-facing her. His features were evidently under the *contre-coup* of some strong emotion. His eyes were resting on Mrs. Trescott, who sat in a low chair, her face buried in her handkerchief.

Every detail of the scene photographed itself as with flame on Beth’s mind. She stood still a

second in complete surprise. They apparently had not heard her enter, and the first instinct was to slip away unseen. Her second, which she followed, to shut the door with sufficient noise to attract attention, and to walk quickly across the long room.

M. d'Isten started, and his attitude, his expression, his whole being seemed to change. He was only a deferential stranger by the time Beth reached her aunt. She laid her hand on Mabel's shoulder and said anxiously :

‘ Can I do anything for you, auntie ? ’

Mrs. Trescott glanced up with a flash of excitement in her eyes which soon dried their moisture.

‘ Oh, Beth ! ’ she exclaimed, ‘ René is my good friend again, my dear friend ! He must be yours too. Greet him warmly, for I admire him——’

Her voice trembled and broke. She drew Beth forward to put her hand in his. The girl was completely mystified, and held back a

minute. M. d'Isten stood by, making no effort to deprecate the warm words; but, looking up, Beth saw his face was lit by an expression of gratitude both manly and sincere.

She gave him her hand.

'My aunt's friends will, I hope, always be mine,' she said.

He bowed profoundly, just touched her hand, and immediately took up his hat and gloves.

'Don't go yet,' said Mabel. 'I have not even offered you a pinch of salt. We must ratify our compact, as do your mother's race, or it may not hold.'

'Then I shall surely stay,' he replied, with that indescribable elegance of pronunciation which so fascinates those who can appreciate it.

Beth slipped away, to lay aside her snowy wrappings and to order cake and wine. She did not return until the servant entered with the tray. Mrs. Trescott and M. d'Isten seemed to have recovered something of their usual manner,

although the gentleman was extremely quiet, and Mrs. Trescott never looked at him without an eloquent reminiscence in her eyes.

‘Beth shall be our Hebe,’ she said; ‘she shall pour out the wine, and we will forget everything, to drink to our long friendship.’

Beth obeyed her aunt in silence. The health was drunk solemnly, Beth taking a sip from her glass while watching the others. She was employing all her powers of discernment in quick scrutiny of this man.

He was pre - eminently aristocratic ; his manners were not only courteous, but courtly. He appeared reticent, in spite of a frank grace which was very attractive. Everything about him was fine, yet Beth had to acknowledge that there was no lack of strength. The lower part of his face was less developed than the upper portion, which was full of power, but the line from ear to chin was excellent ; decisive and lenient at the same time. As for the eyes, Beth

only knew they were dark, for whenever she met them hers fell instantly. He was also studying her with close, if unobtrusive attention.

It seemed to result in little, however, for when he left there was no less coldness in her manner, and only a little added deference in his. He responded with deep appreciation to Mrs. Trescott's earnest wishes for a speedy return from Rome, and bent over her hand as if kindness had been rare to him.

‘You must return before it is too warm,’ she said, ‘so that we can show you the sights. Beth and I know all the places worth seeing, and will gladly be your *ciceroni*; won't we, Beth?’

‘Certainly.’

‘And do take board here; it is so much pleasanter to have friends in the same house,’ continued Mrs. Trescott, who seemed only anxious to atone for past misunderstandings, and to prove that they were all forgotten.

‘What can it mean?’ thought Beth. This

entire reversal of circumstances bewildered her. It could only be explained by the consistency of inconsistency, as Mrs. Jameson terms such a character as Mabel Trescott's.

When the door closed Mrs. Trescott turned to Beth as if to claim her admiration ; but, seeing the lack of comprehension and the astonishment which Beth now allowed her face to express, she turned away, and walked up and down the room, thinking.

‘ So the explanation was satisfactory ? ’ said Beth at last.

Before Mabel answered she put her arm around her niece and drew her into the promenade. They took a few turns in silence.

‘ Well ? ’ said Beth presently. This lack of speech was as remarkable as the rest of it.

‘ I am trying to think what I can tell you. Most that he said was in confidence.’

‘ Indeed ! ’ remarked Beth, a trifle satirically.

‘ If you had been here it might have been——

But no; he would not have spoken then. Oh, Beth!' she cried, stopping suddenly, 'when I think of what he has done, what he is doing now, to-night, I can unhesitatingly assert that his conduct is a lifelong act of self-control and magnanimity unequalled in history or fiction!'

Her eyes blazed superbly, and she stood erect, as if proud to be such a man's friend.

'That is high praise,' said Beth. This was all mysterious, and her reason desired something more solid to satisfy it. Presently she asked:

'You are going to be friends again, now?'

'Of course we are! The best of friends! I admire him more than any man I ever knew. He is so true, and pure, and unselfish. You know nothing about it, Beth.'

'I know I do not. If I am to meet him, can't you tell me how this great change in your opinions came about? Did he have any sufficient apology for what you called, only this afternoon, an insult?'

‘I can’t explain that without your knowing the whole. He could not himself. There was no explanation; he did not attempt to make any. But he begged my forgiveness with a sincerity and humility which no one could withstand. When he regretted his fault, I could do nothing but forgive, could I?’

‘I suppose not. But it was not this that made you so extremely cordial?’

‘No; that was because of what he told me afterwards. I said, “We will let bygones be bygones,” but I could not help feeling formal with him, and that hurt him. Finally he said, as if he had been thinking of it a long time, “I must tell you what may palliate my error. I cannot go away feeling that the friendship you gave me has become cold;” and then he asked me to consider what he might tell me as a sacred confidence. I said, “I never make promises,” but he trusted me, and told me. Oh, I wish I could tell you!’

Beth could not imagine a recital which would cause such a change, and she felt that her aunt was too prejudiced in the man's favour now, as she had before been against him, to be entirely trustworthy.

‘I think I can tell you this much,’ resumed Mabel. ‘It is relative to his wife, and he has acted in the noblest, the most disinterested way I ever could imagine.’

She stopped, and laid her hand on the girl's arm to give full effect to her next words.

‘Beth, you know I am generally on the woman's side, and that I have high ideas of what a man's duties are to his wife. Well, I tell you—I—that this man is an *ideal husband*.’

‘He told you this himself?’ suggested the girl timidly.

‘Yes, yes; I know,’ was the impatient reply; ‘but it is not from words I judge, only acts. He tried to keep himself in the background as much as he could. And, Beth, there was the ring of truth in it all; you could not mistrust

him. Why, his face worked so with emotion that, after the first glance, I dared not look at him ! It is the only time he has ever mentioned it, and you would have been overcome by the sound of suppressed suffering in his voice, just as I was.'

Beth was considerably touched by her aunt's emotion at least.

'Why did he come here?' she said finally. 'Is he going to stay in Italy long?'

'Why did he come? To consummate his act of sacrifice!' Her eyes fired anew at the thought. 'He is going now to Rome to do what no other man would dream of doing. I can only admire him while I regret it. He told me it all. He has never had any one in whom to confide, and this was almost—— Why! it was like a dying confession. It is a question of life and death to him!'

The full lips began to tremble, and another outburst was imminent. Beth was startled by the last words, but said lightly :

'Take care, auntie; you will prejudice me

against your friend again. I shall hate him if he is going to make you feel badly.'

'It isn't that so much,' said Mabel, somewhat incoherently, 'as because I was all used up before, with—with Agatha's letter. It seems as if love—never did—do any—good.'

Beth passed her hand caressingly over the dark curls.

'Whatever this M. d'Isten may have had in his life, auntie dear,' she said, 'you have at least one heart which is devoted to you. Isn't that something?'

'Indeed it is,' said Mabel, trying to recover herself. 'You are all I have, Beth, but you are a great deal more than he is.'

Beth went away in a few moments to her little study. Her mind was in confusion among all these tumultuous ideas, and her predominating thought was, that her dear auntie was preparing sorrow for herself.

'But what can I do?' she thought helplessly.

CHAPTER VII.

‘Every spendthrift to passion is debtor to thought.’

OWEN MEREDITH.

FOR the next few weeks Beth worried constantly about her aunt. She did not seem to recover from what had begun with her sister's letter any more at the end of a fortnight than she had the first day. The influence of M. d'Isten's visit had lasted only while he was present. She had fallen again into abject depression.

The intangibility of the affair was what routed every idea for bettering matters. Beth suggested that they should take a little trip through Northern Italy. No, Mabel would not hear of it. She would not deprive Beth of her lessons, at which, now, she had her last chance. It was a

thing she must endure, she said, and one place was the same as another.

Beth coaxed her out on excursions through the beautiful spring land, with the fragrant air blowing in their faces, and the exquisite sky overhead. Mabel would seem to enjoy it while she was out, but came home to cry in a doleful manner, which made Beth feel hopeless.

‘She must be going to have the fever,’ she said one day to Evra, in an extra hour of anxiety.

‘If she does, mamma and I will take care of her ; but it’s much more likely you will have it, my pet, with those great circles growing under your eyes, and actual hollows coming in your cheeks. Do take care of yourself, darling.’

‘I only want to take care of auntie,’ replied the girl.

But still, finding herself impotent to do anything actively for her aunt, who preferred solitude, and shut herself into her room many hours

alone, Beth allowed herself to be coaxed away oftener than she should have done. This, again, made Mabel feel neglected, and so the trouble grew and grew, like a snowball rolled over innumerable times.

Mingled with this, and increasing it, was the state of affairs with Monsieur d'Isten.

At first Mabel had often talked of him, and would read aloud parts of the letters which she received frequently. They aroused Beth's interest by their style and language, but she felt the constraint of the secret between him and her aunt, and being obliged to take everything on trust where her disapproval had been excited and not allayed, could only be a spectator of the friendship. This Mrs. Trescott felt was cold and selfish, and gradually she came to not mentioning him, except when something directly occurred to introduce his name.

It was the first time that there had ever been any prolonged misunderstanding between Beth

and her aunt, and they both felt it keenly. Each made valiant efforts to overcome it, but, after the first expansion, the result was always the same, for there was a mutual disapproval, and neither could give way. Now came the recognition that their principles were opposed. Mabel laid it all to Agatha's influence, and Beth knew it was the growth of her own individuality, and the fact that she held opinions which she would not allow to be melted into oil to make the wheels of life run smoothly.

When the answer came to Mrs. Trescott's passionate epistle, which she had, of course, sent, it showed the corresponding disappointment and sorrow on the other side; and Mrs. Trescott asserted that the sisterly bond which had united Agatha to her was broken for ever, and that there was nothing to be done but to accept the fact as an irreparable loss. If she could have had something to fight she would have grown strong with the necessity, but this sudden collapse of her

past, present, and future, as she put it, left her nothing but despair.

‘You must have patience with me, and let me adjust myself to circumstances as best I can,’ she would say to Beth drearily. ‘It is hard, hard, any way.’

‘The only way is to have them meet, and meantime give auntie something to do,’ thought the girl at last; and she determined to take the reins from her aunt’s listless hands, and use all her influence to leave Florence, and start towards home earlier. In Paris there would be the interminable shopping, and this would keep her aunt busy, and occupy her mind.

Whether Mrs. Trescott felt the relief of another’s deciding for her, or saw the advisability of Beth’s plan, and was glad of change, she yielded with little difficulty, and stipulated only that they should be in no hurry. She was willing to please Beth, but she could not get in a flurry; that would only be to make her ill.

Evra meantime felt somewhat hurt that her Lily did not respond more adequately to her devotion. Her love for Bethesda, who represented to her all that was uplifting, calm, and pure, was absorbing in its intensity. She wished the girl to feel and call her dearest, but Beth could not allow her to deceive herself with the thought an instant.

‘My sister is the nearest to me,’ she said gravely. ‘I don’t think I can love any one better than I do her. And then there is Aunt Mabel and Aunt Agatha. But, Evra, you are the dearest friend I have.’

‘*Friend!*’ exclaimed the passionate woman putting unutterable meanings in the word, and looking down on Beth from her superior height almost scornfully. But only for a moment. Then she would fall at her feet and cry out, as if in actual pain:

‘Be my friend, Lily! Don’t give me up! I can’t lose you. My heart ached for you for years. Be my dear, wise, faithful friend.’

‘I will try,’ said Beth, distressed. ‘You know you can trust me, Evra, to be always your friend.’

‘I know it, I know it,’ sighed the artist. ‘I will try to be content.’

All this pained Beth. She felt the weight of being loved unwisely, if not too well. She was coming to a vague conception of the difference between being idolised and idealised. One is slavery, the other freedom. One says: What you are now is to me perfection; I never wish you to alter or move. Let me bow down before you. This incases a living being in stone, and death inevitably ensues. The other says: I see great possibilities in you. You have the strength to develop them to their utmost. I trust in you. This gives the spirit wings, and the fullest life is the result.

Beth was feeling the restriction of her pedestal. It made a very narrow platform. She was afraid to stir lest she should fall off, and to stand still

was inimical to all growth. What could she do?

At last one day in April Beth came home from a ride with Evra, in which her aunt had not cared to join. She heard Mrs. Trescott's voice, in unusually gay tones, evidently conversing with callers. The door was open, however, and she could not slip by unperceived; so in her habit, with her hair considerably shaken by a brisk canter, she entered, to find herself confronted by that person before whom she someway especially wished to appear formal—Monsieur d'Isten.

He rose instantly, becoming grave as he did so; but Mabel exclaimed, laughing:

'Oh, you are caught, Beth! Never mind. Our good friend has taken us by surprise, hasn't he?'

By this time Bethesda had recovered her self-possession, and greeted the guest with quiet stateliness. In any guise she could appear both

beautiful and dignified. Seating herself at some little distance she thought she would excuse herself in as short a time as politeness would allow ; but during that period she discovered that her aunt was quite changed from her late self, and was brighter than she had seen her in a long time. M. d'Isten also seemed to have lost all his seriousness in Rome, and there was a continual play of words between the two which was pleasant to witness. Beth had a keen appreciation of wit, and found her severity melting under these clever hits.

‘Perhaps it is just what auntie needs,’ she thought. ‘Some one she likes, and yet who is new to her. He may entertain her, and while they are going around Florence together, I can spend these days freely with Evra.’

And she went into luncheon more cordially disposed than she had cared to be before.

The conversation was about Rome, its wonders and its contrasts of ancient and modern life ; not

a new subject by any means, but Beth found herself often surprised by some quiet originality, some sure criticism, or a turn of thought which presented the matter in a broader light, and connected it subtly with many diverging facts.

Mrs. Trescott seemed delighted.

‘Stay a fortnight,’ she said to her entertaining friend, ‘and we will have some charming days. This is just the time to see Florence. There is nothing so lovely as an Italian spring, is there?’

‘I can hardly admit that,’ answered M. d’Isten. ‘My own land is in the south, you know, and what is familiar is always most beautiful. And we have the sea.’

‘Oh yes; I had forgotten your devotion to that. Beth can sympathise with you there. She finds nothing so grand as the ocean.’

‘Mademoiselle is surely right,’ he said, glancing at her with a veiled curiosity. This reserved maiden was a new study to him. ‘If you like

the sea, mademoiselle,' he added, addressing her directly for almost the first time, 'I am convinced you would find N—— charming.'

'Did you say it was in the Pyrenees, monsieur?' she asked with interest. 'I have always wished to travel there.'

'It is the most beautiful corner in the whole range,' he replied, his face lighting. 'Imagine a valley opening at the south to the sea, with lofty peaks rising at the north and east, and a long spur extending into the water at the west. It ends in an abrupt cliff, where the waves always dash high, even in the calmest weather. That is where I intend to build my castle,' he added, turning with a smile to Mrs. Trescott.

'Yes? Well I hope you will finish it by the time we go there. We certainly must some day. And now let us plan about what we are going to do here.'

Beth noticed the slight shade that fell again upon M. d'Isten's face.

‘Why doesn’t auntie lend herself to his mood?’ she wondered. ‘He must be very fond of his home, and that is always a good trait in a man; but I thought he was from Algeria.’

At this point she was appealed to by her aunt.

‘I suppose you are too tired, Beth, to go out this afternoon? So we will put off our drive to Fiesole until to-morrow.’

‘Oh, don’t wait for me,’ said Beth quickly. ‘This will be a lovely afternoon for the view. You had better not postpone it.’

‘Indeed we will. It would not be half the pleasure without her, would it, René?’

‘Mademoiselle’s presence would necessarily enhance our pleasure; but she may not desire——’

‘She is always delighted with driving,’ interrupted Mabel. ‘And she can tell you a great deal more than I can about all the things you will see. So we will consider it settled for to-morrow at three, if convenient to you.’

‘I am entirely at your command,’ said M. d’Isten ; and Beth acquiesced silently.

She was not going to be tied to entertaining this man, however, she told herself. She wanted to be with Evra ; and he was her aunt’s friend, not hers. Besides, she was not attracted by him. He was a refined and cultured man, undoubtedly ; he might be wonderfully noble—she knew nothing about that ; but there was something hard about his eyes—it had disappeared for an instant when he mentioned his home—and he was self-conscious, she thought, in his very self-forgetfulness, as if that were a duty and not a spontaneous impulse. He lacked fire, she decided, and she never did like a man who failed in warmth.

At this juncture she glanced up, but met his eyes, and hers instantly fell.

What flash of comprehension was there in his face ? Had he read her thoughts ? In any case it rebuked her. Was her penetration so sure that she should condemn a man on that hasty

proof alone? There was no call for her to plunge into the depths and discover all the hidden meanings of his physiognomy. He was her aunt's friend, and all she had to do with him was to be grateful for his rescuing Mrs. Trescott from the slough of despond.

When he held the door open for her to pass out she smiled up at him and said :

‘My aunt is already brightened by your coming. She has not been well, and the pleasure of showing Florence to you will benefit her, I am sure.’

‘She will confer upon me a great favour if she can make me of use. I thank you for suggesting the possibility, mademoiselle,’ he replied, with a politeness as impersonal as her own.

During the next few days Mrs. Trescott thought of nothing, to all appearance, but to *fêter* M. d'Isten.

‘He has had such a sad life,’ she would say to Beth, ‘that I want to make this time as

pleasant as possible to him—a kind of oasis in his life.’

‘Does she never think,’ remarked Evra one day, when Mabel had left them with some such words still echoing in the air, ‘that she may make it too pleasant for him?’

‘I don’t think there can be any danger of that,’ replied Beth gravely. ‘Aunt Mabel is always most sensitive to any such possibility. You see she is nine years older than he is.’

‘That may be; but it is none of my business. And you, certainly, are not over cordial to him. Don’t you like him, dear?’

‘I hardly know him,’ said Beth, a little troubled. ‘He seems to be more pleasant than ordinary acquaintances one makes, and yet——’

‘I understand. Don’t let’s bother over him any more. You and I are enough for one another, aren’t we, sweet?’

The truth was, they were too much absorbed in one another. It annoyed Mrs. Trescott.

‘You don’t pay any attention to my friend,’ she cried one day, in a fit of exasperation. ‘I am much more cordial with your friend than you are with mine. How would you like it if I avoided Evra, and were cold with her, as you are with M. d’Isten? You would think me very unkind and hard.’

‘Excuse me, Aunt Mabel, but it is not the same. You like Evra for herself; I do not like M. d’Isten.’

‘*Why* don’t you like him, then? It is mere prejudice, of which you ought to be ashamed.’

‘It is a prejudice you gave me.’

‘I have wiped all that out. I have forgiven it. What is it to you? You don’t even know what was the matter. If you met him in an ordinary way you would have to take him on trust—as I did when I first met him.’

‘Then my aunt would not have told me he had “insulted” her.’

‘*Don’t* say that! It is altogether too strong

a word any way. And since you know nothing about it, and I do, and I know him and his whole life, can't you believe me when I tell you he is noble and well worthy any woman's friendship ?'

'I can take him as your friend on that, which is what I have tried to do.'

'It is only as my friend that I wish you to take him ; but, instead of being cordial for my sake, you treat him more coldly than you do any one else.'

'I did not mean to. I am sorry if I appeared to do so. I am ill at ease with him ; he does not appeal to me at all ; I suppose that is the trouble.'

'At any rate, you might treat him with ordinary courtesy,' exclaimed Mabel.

'I think even he, who is certainly most courteous, would say I am never otherwise,' replied Bethesda proudly, and went away.

She took herself to task, however, when the heat of this little passage had evaporated, for she was almost morbidly sensitive to rebuke. Why did not she like him? He was in many respects what she most admired, as her aunt often insisted; *distingué*, intelligent, and cultivated; an admirable conversationalist, and quick in mind, but—— Well, he did not touch her. She could not like a person who was unsympathetic to her, but she would try still more to be cordial to him on her aunt's account. Yet she was determined not to let it interfere with being a large part of her time with Evra. The girl knew that the artist's career Guinevere had chosen was full of trial, because in voicing the emotions she stirred all that portion of her nature condemned to silence. Bethesda understood that she was interposed between the artist's triumph and the woman's grief. She, and she alone, could be the instrument to respond to every touch of Guinevere's complex nature, and unite them in

harmonious accord. Was this to be given up for the sake of being constantly with M. d'Isten? No indeed!

The next morning, however, a riding party was formed, in which all joined. It was a perfect day, with a cool breeze blowing over the blossoming orchards, and as they entered the carriage to drive around for Evra, Beth had the brightness of anticipated pleasure in her face, and was more natural than she had ever been with M. d'Isten present.

He did not fancy ladies riding. Amazons did not appeal to his keen sense of the womanly, and Beth was very well aware of the fact. She had tried to avoid the party from her natural dislike to doing anything another did not find pleasurable; but Mrs. Trescott was longing for a gallop, and thought that in the informality of an excursion Beth and René might break through the dignified reticence which separated them; so she insisted, and Beth was now silently defying

with a gay heart the equally silent disapproval of his lordship.

When they reached Mrs. Conover's, however, and Beth went in through the sunshine that flooded the southern archway, her violet habit outlining the rounded figure to perfection, and the long plumes of her velvet cap mingling with the solid coils of bronze hair, he could not help admitting that a true woman will be womanly in any position. He turned to Mrs. Trescott with the first compliment for Beth that he had ever uttered.

‘Your niece, madame,’ he said deliberately, ‘is one of the most exquisite of women.’

‘I knew you would like her!’ exclaimed Mabel triumphantly. ‘Even your difficult taste would be conquered by her. She said you would be bored by the riding, but I told her you would find her and Miss Conover so charming *en amazone* that you could not be bored.’

‘Certainly not,—with you,’ he replied court-

uously, but Miss Hamilton's quick intuition did not escape him.

In a few moments the two girls reappeared, Miss Conover a very Diana in her green dress, with golden curls breaking out from under the stiff English hat, and shortly after they had reached the four horses awaiting them with the grooms outside the Cascine gates.

They had planned to go to a villa and chapel off towards the sea-coast, where the views and works of art were alike beautiful. To reach it they could pass through the Cascine and strike off across the meadows, and all were in the mood for a rustic day.

The *bijou* park looked irresistibly lovely as they entered it. A quadruple avenue of trees arched feathery branches overhead in a tangle of fine lines against the deep sky. At one side of the carriage-way was a grassy space shaded by live oaks intertwined with ivy, now fresh with tender green. A bridle-path ran parallel with the road,

and on the outer side was a wide ditch separating the park from a meadow where troops were practising military manoeuvres. Beyond were the villa-dotted mountains rising in purple beauty to where the snow crowned them with brilliants.

It was an exquisite scene, and the soft charm of spring-time was hushing while it thrilled every nerve. Beth had fallen into silence, and was recalling that day beneath Michel Angelo's great David, when it seemed as if each breath of air were striving to tell her a message, when suddenly she heard a smothered exclamation, and, looking back, saw Nero, Mrs. Trescott's horse, rearing and pawing the air, while M. d'Isten's bay had started aside with a snort of terror.

Before Mabel could regain control of her obstreperous steed he had faced about, made a rush across the road, and, springing high, leaped hedge and ditch, to land several feet beyond on the turf of the meadow.

Mrs. Trescott was a woman of great courage,

and when Nero came to the ground, although she looked a little pale, she nodded reassuringly to the breathless group above, and let him scour off with her across the plain, into the very midst, as it seemed, of the drilling regiments. The black-robed lady, who rode so well, would be somewhat of a surprise as an impromptu visitor on the scene of action.

‘Do go after her!’ exclaimed Beth, appealing to M. d’Isten. He had already turned to do so, and now, putting spurs to his horse, took the ditch, and in a few moments Evra and Beth saw him gaining on Mrs. Trescott’s curveting beast, which some officers had headed off.

‘It is not a bad joke to have your disapproving monsieur obliged to go after Mrs. Trescott in such a scrape,’ said Evra, laughing, as they put their horses to a trot.

‘He doesn’t ride badly, though, does he?’

‘Well enough,’ answered Evra carelessly; ‘but, I say, Mrs. Trescott does know how to

keep her seat ! That was a stiff jump, and you aren't accustomed to such things in America, are you ?'

'No ; auntie learned to ride on an unbroken colt, but it was never at hurdles ! She ought not to ride that horse, or else she should have him obey her. I don't believe in half-way measures myself.'

'Nor I. The measures you have used with Major meet with my approval. He is as spirited a horse as Nero, yet he obeys every touch on the rein.'

'An Englishman taught me to ride, you know,' answered Beth, with a glance of amusement at Evra, who was not a little jealous of Clarence.

'But you were a born rider, witch !'

'Oh, I beg your pardon. You should have seen me going up Vesuvius on horseback at night during an eruption. It was the first time I had ever mounted anything but a donkey, and

wasn't I frightened! You can't think what a coward I used to be about horses. That was what made me so anxious to ride. I never could bear to have any weakness stronger than I. It makes me ashamed until I can afford to laugh at it from the safe side of triumph.'

'I am sure no one would dream of accusing you of being a coward, and I don't believe you ever were. You have not one whit of anything but bravery in you. And anyway, if you ever were timid with horses, it's all the more credit for you to be so fearless now. So you see, darling, anyhow you can fix it, you are my perfect, spotless Lily.'

'Don't say that!' exclaimed Beth hastily. 'You don't know how—how afraid I feel when you talk so.'

'Afraid, childie?'

'Yes, as one feels on a dizzy height. I am always afraid of falling.'

'Pshaw, dear; you won't fall.'

They had now crossed the Piazza, bordered by glistening magnolias, and entered the wilder portion of the Cascine. Here nature had not been disturbed. Great branching ivies draped the budding trees, which were knee-deep in underbrush and earth-loving vines. Looking into this forest one fancied oneself a hundred miles from any habitation, and the constant twitter and occasional jubilant songs of birds favoured the delusion. In some more open spots myrtle blossoms made the ground like 'a bit of the sky, fallen through from on high,' as Beth quoted softly, and Evra immediately beckoned to the groom to pick some.

They had each a cluster of long sprays, mingled with white violets, before their sylvan solitude was interrupted. Then, happening to glance toward the end of the arcade, Beth saw two equestrian figures outlined like statues against the sunny atmosphere beyond. Both tall, slender, and graceful, they were immedi-

ately recognised ; but it was only for a moment that they remained thus in the light, photographing a picture on Beth's mind ; then they entered the shadow of the glade, and soon overtook the pastoral couple.

‘What are you doing here?’ exclaimed Mabel as they came up.

‘Picking myrtle,’ answered Evra, holding up the swaying bouquet.

‘During interludes of gathering laurels,’ remarked M. d’Isten quietly.

‘Merci, monsieur,’ said Evra, smiling, ‘I see you rescued our distressed lady!’

‘Oh, I wasn’t at all in distress,’ cried Mrs. Trescott. ‘You are not to flatter him at my expense, you know. But I confess I was glad to have a friend by me, among all those officers. They were very polite, though. Quite an adventure, wasn’t it?’

‘One can always be sure you will entrap an adventure if there is one possible,’ said Evra,

laughing. 'Beth and I will have to chaperon you, as she says.'

Beth had not spoken since they came up, but as they now all naturally turned towards her she said abruptly :

'Let us go on; we are late,' and started forward. 'I am sure I don't know what it is,' she exclaimed impatiently to Evra, as they rode on, 'but I am actually growing to dislike this friend of auntie's.'

'I cannot see any reason why you should, dear. He is a gentleman in every sense of the word, and he really wishes to become acquainted with you. Give him a chance. It is not like my "just judge" to condemn a man unheard, and you are always so cold and dignified with him, he cannot approach you.'

'You think I am at fault with him, then?'

'You could not lack in courtesy to any one, if you mean that; but you might be a little less severely haughty with him. He seems to be everything one could ask.'

‘But he is not *simpatico*, and—don’t let’s talk of him any more.’

However, this conversation had some effect upon Beth. It was easy for her to be pliant to others’ wills when they were not dictatorial; so, during the excursion she allowed Evra to fall back with Mrs. Trescott, and tried to be more freely receptive of M. d’Isten’s courteous advances. Presently she found it was not so hard as at first, and that he really entertained her.

They talked of life in Algeria. He was charmed with her interest, and she was delighted to hear one familiar with it speak of a country which exerted a strange fascination over her.

‘You were born there, monsieur?’

‘Yes, when my mother was hardly sixteen. They marry young in the South.’

‘But if Algeria is your native country, how is it you come to speak so affectionately of the Pyrenees?’

‘Ah, that is the home of my ancestors. The

place where one's own little life comes into existence has small claims compared with that where fathers and grandfathers have been born and died.'

'It seems unfortunate that one who appreciates such a home should not date his own birth from there.'

'My mother had a great antipathy to France,' replied M. d'Isten quietly. 'She was devoted to her own land.'

'I should have been in her place,' remarked Beth carelessly. He flashed a penetrating glance across her.

'Pardon me, mademoiselle, if I doubt that.'

'Ah!' said Beth, a little startled; 'you think one would not like Algeria?'

'I did not mean that; it was not a question of places. You might love your own free land, for instance, mademoiselle, but there are other things to which you would sacrifice it.'

He spoke in a tone of quiet assurance which amused Beth.

‘You trust much to your impressions, I see.’

‘To what else than his perceptions can a person trust in character?’

‘To experience, most would say.’

‘I am glad you add that. It is unnecessary for me to point out to you that if one waits for experience to judge character, one’s opportunities fly by like those birds across the sky.’

‘And if one trusts to one’s impressions, and they are incorrect?’ said Beth half reluctantly.

‘They should not be,’ was the prompt reply.

‘You have caught yourself there!’ thought Beth, with a sudden flash in her eyes.

‘Nay,’ he answered, with that quick reading which to Beth seemed miraculous; ‘one who judges from impressions must be sure of what and why the impressions are. Vagueness is injustice.’

Beth gave her horse an impatient touch of the whip. Why should she be thus dissected, and why should he presume to instruct her? But

presently he rode beside her again, calling her attention to some unnoticed beauty in the landscape with so sympathetic a manner that she soon allowed herself to be disarmed.

Later, when they arrived at their destination, the far-reaching views seemed to touch both M. d'Isten and Beth in a kindred spirit, and the works of art in the marble chapel, built in commemoration of 'a Laura dearer than Petrarch's,' appealed to the same sensitive sense in each. Thus a truer comprehension quietly built its foundations beneath them, and there was hung by imperceptible threads a bridge over the icy stream that had heretofore separated them.

CHAPTER VIII.

‘The most powerful feeling with a liturgy is the prayer which seeks for nothing in especial, but is a yearning to escape from the limitations of our own weakness, and an invocation of all good to enter and abide with us.’—*Daniel Deronda*.

‘Only I discern
Infinite passion, and the pain
Of finite hearts that yearn.’

ROBERT BROWNING.

It had been arranged that after their return from their ride Mrs. Trescott and Beth should go to the representation of a French drama, given by an excellent company, with M. d’Isten.

Evra could not go, as she was to sing the next night, and did not wish to get the bad air of the theatre into her throat. Great was the surprise of all, therefore, when Miss Conover made her appearance in handsome toilette just as the others were about to start.

‘You have changed your mind? I am so glad!’ exclaimed Beth, hastening to welcome her friend. But she found there was unusual cause for this change when her hand was almost crushed in a fierce grasp.

‘What is the matter?’ she asked, alarmed by Evra’s manner, and the defiant light in her eyes.

‘Nothing!’ said Guinevere abruptly. ‘I am going to Milan to-morrow, and I *would* be with you to-night.’

‘To Milan! Why, you are advertised to sing!’ said Mrs. Trescott.

‘I know, but everything is upset. A telegram calls me to Milan. There is no putting it off.’

‘I hope it is not bad news?’

‘Bad enough, and I want to forget it!’ exclaimed Evra, drawing Beth’s arm through hers. ‘I beg your pardon, Mrs. Trescott, but I am so angry I can hardly speak. You will forgive me? Thanks. Now, shan’t we go down? I did not intend to detain you.’

As the three women passed M. d'Isten, who held aside the *portière*, he classed them instantly. The airy, languid grace and sudden energy of Mrs. Trescott; that, he knew well. The passionate intensity of the artist; that he was already weary of. The delicate sympathy and reliance of Miss Hamilton :

‘I must know her,’ he decided quietly, and it should be admitted that he did not adequately regret Miss Conover’s near departure.

The next day, when Beth went down to stay with her friend and see her off, she heard the news. It was of a character to depress any one.

The man to whom Evra had been engaged and later refused, was taking a manly revenge by endeavouring to shut off her opportunities in London, spending his money with a lavish hand in the praiseworthy endeavour. It would retard the artist for years, wasting precious time, if he should succeed, and her former *maestro* had telegraphed her to come immediately if she wished

to foil the machinations. There was no choice possible, so she had paid the forfeit to the Florentine *impresario*, had been obliged to forego her benefit, and all because she had refused to marry a man whose actions made her despise him.

‘But aren’t you glad you are free?’ exclaimed Beth, when Guinevere thus ended the story.

‘Ah, for that, yes! But shouldn’t I have led him a pretty life when all this fine character came out after marriage? He wouldn’t have had an easy time of it, you better believe!’

‘And you would have had a horrible life! Imagine being bound to such a person! Oh, I am so thankful for you! After all, this is a small price to pay for your freedom.’

‘Hum! To-day I would be almost willing to be “bound” to him for the pleasure of tormenting him. He wouldn’t find life a bed of down, you may rest assured! But there; I am talking nonsense,’ she said, pulling herself up short, as she noticed the pained expression on Beth’s face.

She stopped packing, and came to take Beth's hands.

‘Do you know, child, what makes me feel this more than all is the leaving you. I can't bear to go away from you. It tears my heart.’

There was a tone of intense emotion in her voice which almost frightened Beth. Evra was scanning her face with wild eyes. After a moment she said, in suppressed tones :

‘You like me, you are fond of me ; all in your cool lily-like way. And what are you to me ?’ She snatched the girl into a suffocating embrace. ‘You are my dearest on earth. I thought this power of loving any human being was killed in me. I could have sworn there was no one in the whole world who could ever hold my heart as you do. I tell you, child, it is tearing my heart out to leave you. I may never find you the same. No, you need not protest. I know I am a friend to you—a dear friend—if you like ; but you are inexpressibly more than a friend to me. You

are all the love I have in the world ; all I can give or take. You are my heart itself !’

‘What can I say, dear Evra ?’ began Beth, but the artist interrupted her passionately.

‘There it is ! You ask, “What can I say ?” while I speak and find words only too poor ! I know you can’t help it ; you *don’t* feel as I do, and that is the despair of it. Yet you will love some day. It is not that you lack passion ; it is all slumbering within you ; and when it is awakened—oh, shan’t I be jealous ?’

She pushed the girl away almost roughly, and returned to her trunk. Beth did not know what to do. This intense love weighed upon her heavily. She did not feel Evra supreme, nor did she desire to do so. And yet she was so sorry for Evra, so grieved that she could not give all that was asked of her, that she almost blamed herself.

Thus it had gone on in alternations of passionate outbursts and constraint all day. Evra would

not let Beth out of her sight, and Beth wished to do everything she could to please her, and remained with her until the train left.

It was with a sigh of mingled relief and depression that she turned away from the station. This absorption was wearying, and yet the world seemed cold without it.

‘If I ever find a man who loves me like that, and whom I can love——’ But the thought would not be completed. ‘Of course it is impossible,’ she said aloud severely; and then she had reached the house and found everything lonely and chill. She could hear her aunt’s voice and M. d’Isten’s in the parlour, but the sound only made her more lonely. The rooms were dark; heavy clouds had obscured the sunset, and the twilight was fast fading into night. It was too warm for a fire, but the threatening rain chilled the air. Everything seemed dreary and cold; and her sympathy for Evra emphasised her own feelings until she felt very near the region of tears.

But this would never do! She was not a woman who appreciated the luxury of a 'good cry;' so now she sprang to her feet and lit the candles, casting about her for a new thought. The first rays revealed a book lying on the table. It was *Bones and I*, a weird favourite of hers. With a momentary hesitation she opened it and read:

'You talk of suffering being pure waste; I tell you it is all pure gain. You talk of self being the motive to exertion; I tell you it is the abnegation of self which has wrought out all that is noble, all that is good and useful, and nearly all that is ornamental in the world. It is not the dreamer, wrapped in his fancied bliss, from whom you are to expect heroic efforts, either of mind or body. Wake the dreamer roughly; drive spurs and goad into his heart. He will wince, and writhe, and roll, and gnash his teeth, but I defy him to keep still. He must be up and doing from sheer tortures, flying to

one remedy after another, till he gets to work, and so finds distraction, solace, presently comfort; and, after a while, looking yet higher, hope, happiness, reward.'

Beth stopped and looked out into the darkening garden, where a few dim stars were striving to pierce a rainy mist. There would come a time, she knew, when these words would be throbbing truth to her; when the thought of the book would be unendurable, because she, too, would be going through the mill.

She sat thinking a long time. In the play the night before an innocent man had accused himself of murder to save an innocent friend and the honour of the woman he loved. Beth felt the power within her to do something of the kind. She was hungry, not to be loved, but to love. She wanted some one on whom she could pour out the whole wealth of her affection, and not feel that it had been wasted, but given to the highest use. She believed she could walk

to the stake steadily, proudly, for one thus dear to her, or for what she knew was right.

There was no danger of tears now. Heroism, even in thought, blots out the possibility of such weakness.

The next day was Sunday. Mrs. Trescott went to church alone, to the American chapel, where a 'union' service was held, supposed to unite all the sects for a time at least under the national flag. Beth did not wish to accompany her, and her aunt let her do as she liked. She had always made a principle of this in religious matters. She was a Unitarian herself, and believed, as she said, in freedom to worship God.

In the present age any thought makes room for a million doubts, and these had attacked both Margaret and Bethesda as soon as they were old enough to understand anything but obedience to custom. Margaret became involved in the toils of that false philosophy which cramps through making tests for the spirit by material things.

It was only after years of struggle and desperation that she found relegating things and thoughts to their true places brought her peace, and learned to lift herself from independence of thought to true knowledge and dependence on the love of God.

Bethesda was quite her opposite in temperament. Margaret had to be convinced before she would yield her opinions one jot; Beth obeyed instinctively. Everything in Margaret's nature had been drawn from chaos, as it were, and consciously formed into a rounded world; Beth's was a sphere launched into space with only its orbit to discover. But Margaret was steadfast to her central sun, while Beth was drawn hither and thither by the attraction of different planets, and had no definite aim. She had been accustomed from infancy to hear of her sweetness of character as much as her lovely face, and she rested in the assurance of one as of the other, thinking it unnecessary to cultivate either.

The trials and temptations of a lovable temperament, as it is usually termed, are not, as a rule, understood. We are apt to think that such persons have no difficulties to solve, no struggles to undergo. To them we say everything comes rose-coloured and perfumed; it is no task to them to be good. But this is a mistake. Such natures have an inevitable tendency to weakness. They lack that conscious principle, formed by sturdy endeavour, which is the only enduring cement of a worthy character. They are liable to the error of considering their instincts, generally true, an infallible guide, or of following blindly the guiding hand of one they have been accustomed to depend upon. Just because they are equally developed on many sides they are subject to many attractions which draw them from their individual orbit. They are sensitive to influences, and yield with a plasticity which makes them take on different forms as well as colours until they are insecure of their own.

Bethesda had partially recognised these errors during her illness. It had been a serious period to her. For the first time she had comprehended that to stand erect, not to be carried, or to lean, is of vital importance to integrity.

In the recognition of self-responsibility she had found the hollowness of her childish faith. It was as empty to her as one of her china dolls, and she cast it from her as she would any lifeless illusion of childhood. But the loss of the symbol left her with nothing to take its place. The idea of religion was a blank to her. A habit, a vague sense of something others knew about and she would experience some time, was all religion had been to her; and now her awakened mind would not be lulled by imagination or any hereditary faith. She had a strong feeling, not altogether unshared by greater minds, that some new revelation was at hand; that this was the eve of a transforming era; and she took a certain pride in holding herself un-

defiled for that new religion. She must see now, and clearly, to believe, and meantime the highest she could apprehend was her own perception of right.

In this state of mind formal churchgoing was a mockery to her; she shrank from it as hypocrisy; and Mrs. Trescott left her behind with a comfortable conviction that these worries had to come to any one with brains, and that some time Beth would waken and discover the world knew more than she did, in spite of her foolish dream.

But it was very real to Beth, and to still her uneasy craving she would dress as inconspicuously as possible, and, with the faithful Assunta on guard beside her, walk or drive swiftly to the Santissima Annunziata, or Dante's Santa Croce, and give herself up to the æsthetic religion which was now her refuge.

George Sand writes that her grandmother on her deathbed said solemnly: 'J'ai toujours cru en Dieu, mais écoute ceci, ma fille, je ne l'ai pas

assez aimé.' With Bethesda, up to this time, it might have been said that she always loved God, but she did not sufficiently believe in him. Her nature was always going out blindly towards some perfection which she could worship, to some absolute power which should be *sure*. She was empty, as it were, and the first feelings of hunger, a vague pain, a faintness, a desire for she knew not what, made themselves felt. She tried to find something to satisfy her—something to quell that indistinct disease which intuition told her was dangerous. Morally, her conscience was a staff whose soundness she did not doubt; but mankind, and particularly woman-kind, feel the need of something besides morality to fill their lives—something beyond and above it. A noble nature is essentially a hero-worshipper; and if it has not a real, and eternal, and absolute hero to worship, it will find a great temptation to throw itself at the feet of this or that idol as the better, if not the best.

Happily, Bethesda had too natural a cleaving to the unalterable and highest *best* for her to yield to this temptation. When she believed, it must be in something verifiable, something which would appeal to a higher court than that of the senses or the emotions—to that highest of all, which dwarfs suffering, hushes complaint, and gives one strength to bear all, and rejoice in the bearing.

Meantime she stood alone.

As she came out of church, half envying Assunta, who was wiping her eyes beside her—she had been praying that her dearest signora might be admitted into the holy Church—Monsieur d'Isten quietly stepped to her side. She shrank, just perceptibly, in recognising him. She had had no idea he was in the church. She was not at all aware that he had been watching her with that keen discernment which was one of his most marked characteristics. She felt a certain shock of intrusion in his presence which

she tried to cover instantly ; but he, of course, had seen it.

He accompanied her to the carriage, speaking only a few grave words by the way, and when she turned to ask him to join her found him already lifting his hat as he moved swiftly away. She admired his quick perception, and yet it annoyed her. She scolded herself roundly. She had been rude—and to him !

CHAPTER IX.

‘Our sympathy is a gift we can never know, nor when we impart it. The instant of communion is when, for the least point of time, we cease to oscillate, and coincide in rest by as true a point as a star pierces the firmament.’—THOREAU.

‘Sympathy, viewed from the passive side, on the active side is called benevolence.’—W. H. MALLOCK.

RENÉ D’ISTEN’S character was of an essentially foreign quality. The courts and customs of Europe educate persons in a school entirely different from any American’s experience, and it is difficult for them to gain just impressions of the Latin mind.

Mrs. Trescott understood him only superficially. She recognised him as a refined and courteous aristocrat, with a republican liberality ; a remarkable uniting of frankness and reserve, of

cordiality and distinction. Further, into the motives of his life, the causes of these results, she did not look, unless during the time when she was under the vivid influence of the secret he had confided to her.

Bethesda was more of a psychologist, but only an intuitive one. There was much to admire in him. His mind was as well-poised as his head, and there was a firmness of steel in his decisions as in his muscles. He was keenly appreciative of sentiment, while the hazy raptures of sentimentality disappeared like mists under the sunlight of his clear mind. He had a marvellous amount of tact, and his perceptions were acute ; not a quiver of sensitive lips escaped him, nor the subtlest tremor of thought.

Bethesda also apprehended instinctively a certain wariness and suppleness of mind ; a duality in the man, which, when she was out from under his direct influence, confused and blurred her impressions. Not that he was in-

sincere—his ardent devotion to certain causes and persons barred such suspicions—but she was aware that he exercised a self-control, which had become a second nature, and presented himself to the world only as he wished to be seen. Who could tell, then, where this ended and his real self began?

Now this duality, which Bethesda did not justly understand, is peculiarly European. The intrigue of society nurtures the man from his cradle. He is taught self-control and tact before he is taught frankness and truth, and, when after-life builds a superstructure, one cannot be sure on which foundation it has its basis. In any case, the man is dual; he has two selves; one that he himself knows, or thinks he knows, and one that the world thinks it knows. These intermix and fuse their qualities so dexterously that finally no one can say which is the body, so to speak, and which the spirit; they are quite as interactive as this problem of the philosopher's. The in-

dividual, meanwhile, is neither one nor the other: he is actually both.

M. d'Isten had used many of the qualities of both sides of his nature in his acquaintance with Mabel Trescott. She was proud of her power to make persons feel insecure of her, and between her and M. d'Isten there had been a continual warfare, in which now one, now the other, was conquered and conqueror. On the whole, however, M. d'Isten triumphed. He had patience, as well as versatility, and his will-power was a carefully developed capacity, in which he had received much training from himself and others, while Mabel's was capricious and inconstant. She delighted as much in giving full blossoms, when green buds alone were expected, as in giving a thorn-prick when one bent to inhale a tropical fragrance. And René d'Isten knew how to receive the flower with grace no less well than he knew how to avoid the thorns, and after their reconciliation he had secured himself in her friendship,

she hardly knew how, but much more decidedly than before.

This left him comparatively free to follow up his resolve of knowing more of Miss Hamilton, and Mrs. Trescott was very willing to aid him. Bethesda herself was passive in their hands. The sudden separation from her friend, who had engrossed the girl to an almost exhausting degree, left her in a subdued and listless state of mind. The approaching farewell to the scenes she loved, to Italy, and the life she had lived there, gave a tinge of wistful sadness to all her thoughts; and the enervating influence of an Italian spring made her yield to her aunt unquestioningly, drifting with the stream of her desires.

Thus they were either driving through the still air, looking on scenes of rarest loveliness, or visiting churches filled with the art of centuries, and mystically solemnised by the glamour of a symbolic religion, or sitting in their own shadowy

parlour, talking and listening to gradual unfoldings of character.

What wonder, then, that M. d'Isten, with his thorough *savoir-faire*, was able to make the barrier of prejudice crumble away unnoticed? He knew how to impress himself upon Bethesda's mind by imperceptible means that could arouse no surprise or even recognition. He talked to her no more than formerly, but in his conversations with her aunt he allowed his inner nature to come to the surface, and show itself in a thousand delicate ways, which could not but win attention from one so sensitive to all refinement as Bethesda.

One afternoon, the day before their projected departure from Florence, whence they were to go to Paris in company, they came up from luncheon a little wearied by the exertion of packing on a warm day. Bethesda seated herself by the shaded window to enjoy the jessamine and tiny cream roses which wreathed it in

a multitude of delicate lines. The outline of her face and figure was cut clearly against the dark-blue damask, while an eager ray of sunlight found and rested on the bronzed gold of her hair. Mrs. Trescott threw herself on an ottoman near by, and leaned her head against Beth's knee. The girl idly broke off clusters of the rose-vine, and weaved them in among her aunt's dark curls.

M. d'Isten paced the room in a silent mood of repressed excitement. The languor of a southern mid-day, the surroundings of the beautiful room, the atmosphere of domestic womanliness, threw a charm around the group to which this man was almost painfully sensible.

'I wish you could have known my mother,' he said abruptly. 'I often feel as if she knew you.'

Mabel looked up in surprise, while Beth said simply :

'Tell us about her.'

It was a subject on which he seldom spoke, but it was becoming no new thing for him to give expression to ideas and feelings that had previously been unspoken. Now he answered as simply as he had been asked.

‘You know she was an *Orientale*. Her father was a man of great influence in Algiers, and she was his favourite child. She was educated as few Eastern women are even when my father married her, and she was then, as I told you, mademoiselle, only fifteen. She was very beautiful. My father took her to Paris soon after they were married, but he returned with her to Algiers quickly. She disliked Paris, and the attention she attracted there seemed to hurt her. It made her shrink and wince. She was essentially Eastern,’ he went on, twining a jessamine wreath slowly around his hand; ‘her nature had the grace and warmth of the tropics. Her very soul was given to my father, and yet I have heard him say that she inspired him with a reverence

that made him feel afar off at times. Some women seem to reach higher than any man can.'

He paused a moment, and his mind appeared to be absent from his surroundings. Neither of the ladies spoke. Presently he said:

'My father, too, was very young when he married. He did not realise that he would be giving up his country in marrying an Algerian. But when he found she would be unhappy elsewhere he made the sacrifice quietly. Perhaps no one knew what a sacrifice it must have been so well as I.'

'Your father and mother were a great contrast to one another, were they not?' asked Beth.

'Markedly so. He is reserved and quiet, and has an iron will. He is somewhat cold also, but a man must not show too much feeling. You see, he is quite my ideal,' he added, smiling.

'A Bayard, Beth once called him,' said Mabel teasingly.

The words recalled, as by magic, the con-

versation in the train between Genoa and Florence, and Beth was silent, thinking how strangely events had come round that they two should be sitting there conversing intimately with a man whom that day they both disliked. And how about her presentiment?

She pushed the obtrusive thoughts away by saying :

‘ You are a great deal with your father ? ’

‘ Not of late years. When I was a lad I used to be with him as constantly as school duties would allow ; but not now. ’

‘ Have you brothers and sisters, monsieur ? ’

‘ Two step-brothers. My sister died when I was a child. ’

The girl looked up at him with sudden pity. She felt the meaning that lay under the reticence of his tone. He was a man of domestic nature, and fate had made all his family relations cold. To Beth, whose only fear of death was the thought of its loneliness, this life of continued

heart-solitude was terrible. She felt that she could never bear such a burden, and yet he was always so cheerful and sunny!

‘Monsieur,’ she said with one of her rarely tender smiles, ‘you must be either very strong or very hard; which is it?’

‘Which is it? I ask you, mademoiselle.’

‘I will not flatter you,’ she replied; and Mabel glanced up well pleased. The remark was a milestone which showed the distance traversed during these quiet, dreamy days.

‘You are a judge of character, mademoiselle,’ resumed M. d’Isten presently. ‘Will you tell me what you think of my father’s face? I have a photograph here.’

On her cordial assent M. d’Isten took from his pocket a book which was stamped with his name and crest.

‘What a charming little affair!’ exclaimed Mabel; ‘may I see it?’

He had taken out the photograph, and now

handed it to Beth, while Mrs. Trescott examined the coat of arms.

‘May I see what is inside?’ she asked mischievously.

‘If you like.’

‘Oh, you are altogether too amiable. Come, Beth, let me see that; you have been studying it long enough.’

‘It is a fine head,’ said Beth, glancing at M. d’Isten. There was a strong resemblance between father and son. ‘He is quite what I had imagined him: severely noble, and yet a man I would trust for liberality and charity without limit. I wish we had met him. I don’t think I should be afraid of him.’

‘You would have no cause to be, you would understand one another,’ he said, with a proud light in his eyes. ‘He is a man you could appreciate.’

‘A handsome old gentleman,’ remarked Mrs. Trescott, carelessly putting the photograph on a

table near by. 'You will have white hair like that one of these days.'

'Yes, we turn gray early,' he replied, opening his book to replace the card. As he did so another photograph was half disclosed.

'Who is that? Let us see that,' exclaimed Mabel.

He flashed a glance across her, but without a word gave her what she desired.

'Oh,' she said deprecatingly, as she saw a woman's face, 'it is your wife.'

He did not answer. Mabel was studying the picture, and Beth, after an involuntary glance at M. d'Isten's pained face, kept her eyes steadily downcast.

How could her aunt have made such a mistake? And he carried his wife's photograph always with him, in spite of what must have happened. He had a devoted nature to be so fond of his home, his father, and his wife. Her notion of his 'chilly disposition,' 'unwarmed

intellectuality,' and so forth, began to dissolve and disappear.

'It is a discontented face,' said Mabel at last, with an accent of dislike in her voice. 'Otherwise, she is a handsome woman.'

As Mrs. Trescott returned it to M. d'Isten he offered it to Bethesda in silence.

'Thanks,' she said, refusing to receive it with a slight gesture, and not looking up.

If she had seen his expression of satisfaction then it would have puzzled her. This impulsive girl, with her keen sympathy and desire not to intrude, would have found it difficult to understand how any action of hers could have the slightest effect at such a moment. But he was not one to lose intellectual perception through emotion, and when his insight was verified it gave the pleasure of a gratified faculty.

Such a man, brought into familiar intercourse as he now was with a woman like Bethesda Hamilton, found a forceful charm in her mobile

sympathy. The play of feeling in her face had an unceasing fascination. There was an iridescence of thoughts and moods, which, like the sea, rippled over an underlying strength on which one could buoyantly repose. She was fully his equal in quick comprehension, although from different causes, and her depth of emotion and spontaneity were a contrast that unconsciously answered to his own need.

Now, however, the former good understanding was for the time disturbed. The shadow of this dark secret fell over all three. Beth had risen, and was wandering around the room, while the others kept up a disjointed conversation. She felt an intruder when she came up against this blank wall through which the others had a gate. Presently she bethought her of a letter to be finished for the evening mail, and slipped unnoticed away.

She had been writing for some time, and had forgotten all her worries, when Mabel startled

her into making a great dash by throwing aside the curtains and exclaiming :

‘ You truant ! it’s a shame——’

‘ It certainly is !’ interrupted the girl. ‘ See what you made me do ! Isn’t she naughty, monsieur ?’

‘ Perhaps it was unkind to interrupt such an interesting letter,’ he said, ‘ with just the least tone of depression in his voice.

‘ A most interesting letter, I assure you,’ she said demurely.

‘ I will tell him your secret if you don’t come,’ cried Mabel, ‘ take care !’

‘ I will be there as soon as I have finished this. You see, you have put me back, and it must be ready for to-night’s mail.’

M. d’Isten had been watching her closely ; he saw the slight flush in her cheeks, the brilliance in her eyes, and he thought he knew it all. Somewhat abruptly he turned away.

‘ See, René is hurt,’ said Mabel in a low tone.

‘I think you might leave your letter. Anyway, if you don’t,’ in a louder voice, ‘I shall tell him.’

‘Very well,’ answered Beth carelessly. She never could be forced in anything, and certainly her aunt could entertain her friend for a few moments unassisted.

Mrs. Trescott chose her for the topic.

‘Guess to whom she is writing, René?’

‘Her *fiancé*,’ he replied, as if there were no doubt about the matter.

‘Hardly ; but I sometimes wonder if she will care for a *fiancé* more than she does for this. She sends a weekly letter to one of our best papers ; isn’t she clever?’

M. d’Isten turned sharply.

‘Mademoiselle writes?’ he exclaimed ; ‘she writes and publishes?’

‘She does indeed. It surprises you? She would not let me tell you before ; she is very sensitive about having it known. But really, she has no need to be. She receives good pay ;

that shows her letters are worth something. Money is the test, especially with us, you know. But why should it amaze you so?' she added, noticing his absent manner, and a peculiar luminous appearance in his eyes.

'I cannot say—it is so unexpected——' He put his hand over his eyes a moment; then presently asked in his usual tone, but with eagerness:

'On what subjects does she write? On art?'

'Oh no; mostly bits of foreign life, descriptions of this and that. Anything interesting, you know.'

'And what name does she use?'

'Her own. She did not like the idea of a *nom de plume*.'

'What is her own? Simply "Beth"?' (He pronounced it 'Bet'.)

'No; that is an abbreviation. Her real name is Bethesda, from the Bible, you know. She has always had a romantic notion that it meant

something in her life. She is full of such fancies. I think she will always like Algeria, because it was from there she first wrote. Not but that she has always been inclined to scribble; and even before she was old enough to do that she made her dolls talk to one another, like a story-book. We used to find it an excellent method to discover what had made an impression on her, for she would repeat conversations she had heard, weaving in her own fancies, and imaginary incidents, until we could hardly tell ourselves where what we had said left off and her own notions began.'

'But she first published from Algeria?' said M. d'Isten, with repressed eagerness.

'Yes, she was very deeply impressed with the country there. Ah, ha, Miss!' she cried, as Beth here came in; 'your secret is yours no longer. And René was greatly shocked to hear of your presumption! I doubt if he will ever speak to you again.'

‘On the contrary, I beg you to accept my profound congratulations, mademoiselle.’

‘Thank you,’ she said, blushing prettily. ‘I was afraid you would think me silly.’

‘How could I? You knew well I would not. The supreme thing one can do is to exercise one’s faculties for the benefit of others, and you are allowing many the privilege of looking through your eyes.’

‘Yes, that is what some of her critics say,’ remarked Mabel. ‘“She makes us see what she sees,” they say, “not coloured, but what it actually is.” We are very proud of that!’

‘Don’t, auntie!’

‘And why not, if you please? I have a good right to praise my niece, if I wish. It gives me a reflected glory.’

‘Don’t tease, Aunt Mabel.’

‘Mademoiselle Bethesda,’ said M. d’Isten, drawing nearer her, ‘will you let me take your

hand, and wish that this may bring you all the happiness I desire for you ?’

His tone struck Beth as a little odd, but she held out her hand cordially. He took it in his, which was well-formed, thin, and ascetic ; its clasp, rarely given, was possessive, not alone of another, but of himself ; now it closed around Beth’s, until she felt hers unbreakably bound.

‘Understand,’ he said, ‘all the happiness I can desire for you. You may never know what that is, but pray accept the assurance that no wish was ever more sincere.’ He released her hand, and then asked : ‘May I see your letter ?’

‘Oh no !’ she exclaimed ; ‘it really isn’t worth your reading.’

‘Let me be the judge. You need not be afraid to have me see what thousands read and praise.’

‘But it is all about little traits of foreign life, which would be a twice-told tale to you.’

‘And what is more charming than a glimpse of a scene familiar to us through a stranger’s discerning eyes? Don’t we all enjoy a painting better of something we know? You will give a new gem to my collection.’

‘But you will be so disappointed, with such ideas in your mind! I think I had better leave you in undisturbed possession of your fancy rather than interfere with the reality.’

‘You could give me a great pleasure,’ he answered quietly.

Bethesda wavered at this. There was something, she could not tell what, that took from her all desire to refuse. He had a persuasive quality, that relied little on words, but made one feel, insensibly as it were, that what he wished was easiest and best.

‘Well, since you are kind enough to care about it, I will give you a printed letter,’ she said, after a momentary hesitation. ‘But don’t read it until you are away from us,’ she added,

with a deprecating glance ; ‘ then you can skip all you like.’

He was wise enough to be content with this ; and, when she had found and given him the letter, still with a shy reluctance, he pressed her to sing, knowing she would thus lose her unwonted self-consciousness quickest.

Her vocal accomplishments were not at all ambitious, and perhaps for that reason they pleased him the more. In any case he would listen attentively as long as she could be prevailed upon to remain at the piano, surrendering himself to the charm of a voice in which pathos and passion mingled.

Her last song was ‘ The Minstrel Boy,’ and as its stirring chords stopped she wheeled towards him with a patriotic fire in her eyes.

‘ You were in the war, monsieur ?’ she exclaimed.

‘ Yes,’ he answered shortly. A dark look came over his face, and his mouth set in a stern

line. He replied to Beth's startled glance by saying:

‘The war was a trick, a cruel deception. The gambler made the throw as a last resource, and when it failed, France was the one who paid. I led a few companies to the slaughter,’ went on M. d’Isten, his voice gaining a tense resonance. ‘I saw how our men gave their lives gladly for their country,—and how they cursed when they found it was only to bring her to dishonour! Louis Napoleon tarnished his country’s fame; he outraged what should have been dearer to him, more sacred than his own mother;—what Frenchman can forgive?’

Here was what aroused the self-controlled man. He stood with his arm lifted as if he would strike every enemy of France to the earth, his tall figure erect and martial. He never had looked more of a man. Then his hands dropped and clasped before him.

‘I love my country,’ he said, with a tone of

deep tenderness ; ‘ I would give my life to keep one grain of dust from her robes. All Frenchmen feel the same ; and yet that man, our *soi-disant* emperor, made us soak her skirts in the mire of blood and wrong. He brought us to such a pass for his own selfish ends, that we were obliged to do it ; then, to complete the ignominy, he deceived us, so that we fell. The iron foot of foreign tyranny was placed on the neck of our nation, of our country, of our France ! ’

He broke off suddenly. Something rose in his throat and impeded utterance. He had never spoken in this way before. He had never known what it was to give way in *abandon*. But because a man is slow to fire it does not follow that he has no passion, as Bethesda now began to comprehend.

The impetus of the pent-up stream finding egress, carried him on now past even this curious faltering.

‘I do not say that we were guiltless. We should have recognised the wrong it was to France to place her in the power of a Louis Napoleon. We should have flung far from us the shame of the *coup d’état*. We should have shown the world that we could not be made into slaves even by ourselves. But we did not, and the fruits of slavery came. We were shown the tyranny of a master by subjection to a foreign power. There may have been treachery; there may have been deceit; but if we could not rise above these to the height of loyalty and honour we deserved to fall—as we have.’

‘Have you?’ said Beth bravely. ‘It seems to me that France was never so noble as now. She has thrown off the chains of the past and commenced a truer government. She first sowed the seeds of liberty throughout Europe, and she is now leading it in action. Has she not risen instead of fallen? She is whole-souled in her devotion to a cause. Just think how she broke

through all the machinations of her enemies when she paid, in an incredibly short time, the debt Bismarck expected would cripple her for years ! I think she is more worthy of admiration than she has ever been. She is not cast down ; she is not despondent ; and it is better to lose all than to fail in striving.'

M. d'Isten had listened to her with a grave face, and eyes fixed upon the floor. He raised them now, and Bethesda was startled by their shining.

'You are right, mademoiselle. I shall not forget. France and America exchange their gifts. They are comrades in arms. France gave America the idea to work upon ; America gave France the solid encouragement of example, the sturdy child of her theories. I believe France can be a republic. She will have strength to carry her government, as you say, like a lantern before the eyes of Europe. She will not desert the cause, nor her sons their ambition.'

‘What a patriot you are, René!’ exclaimed Mrs. Trescott. ‘I never knew you so enthusiastic before.’

‘Perhaps I never have been, at least in words ; but I cannot imagine life without France.’

He took a turn or two in silence, and then added, with a smile :

‘I remember in Algeria, when I was hardly out of dresses, how I used to long for *notre patrie*. It warms my heart to find you so eloquent in its defence, mademoiselle.’

‘She is a perfect blue stocking in her devotion to the French Revolution,’ said Mrs. Trescott ; ‘she is always reading about it.’

‘It is the most interesting period in modern history, surely,’ returned Beth quietly, as she crossed to a seat. ‘And it was your love for France which made you choose diplomacy as a profession, monsieur?’

‘No ; I entered the career in obedience to my father.’ A cloud of remembrance took the light

from his face, but he continued cheerfully : ‘ The work suits me. It brings into action each quality of the mind, and gives occupation to one’s thoughts. It is also a position of considerable power.’

‘ Yes, indeed,’ said Beth. ‘ If I had been a man I should have tried to be a statesman. Why, everything is in their hands. They crystallise theories into action, and show the result in a State.’

‘ Where did you find that idea, mademoiselle ?’

‘ Where should I ? In my brain, I suppose.’

‘ It is an excellent brain if there are many such thoughts in it.’ He was silent for a moment. ‘ Do women take much interest in politics in America ?’ he asked then of Mrs. Trescott.

‘ Some do ; Beth, for instance. She is like her mother in that. I never could take the trouble to originate any ideas. Of course I could have done it had I taken the trouble ! *Cela va sans dire*. It was only during our war that I kept

trace of affairs. Then, I assure you, women were interested !’

‘ And then it was, doubtless, that mademoiselle first took her interest in *la politique* ? ’

‘ Oh, certainly ; a child of four years ! ’

‘ Patriotism can burn in a child’s heart as well as a woman’s,’ said Beth ; ‘ and I can remember well my ambition to do something for the soldiers, and putting my whole little strength into making pincushions ! ’

‘ You should have her marry a statesman, madame.’

‘ Ah ! she will marry whom she chooses without being much influenced by me, I fear. And I don’t want her to marry for ever so long yet. What should I do without her ? ’

‘ What indeed,’ murmured M. d’Isten.

Beth had been wandering around the room, and did not hear these last phrases, which were spoken in an undertone. The sun had set in a golden radiance, and the twilight now grew and deepened.

Beth's white dress shone dimly in the darkening atmosphere; and as the breaking up of this dreamy period drew near, as the delicious perfumes of the garden were drifted through the open windows, as René d'Isten thought of them and they of leaving Florence, a silence commenced, and grew, and lingered, until not one of the three knew how to break it.

Who can say what impulse it was that made Bethesda go to the piano and let fall on the stillness a low, minor melody, which bore these words :—

‘ Parle-moi ; que ta voix me touche ;
Chaque parole sur ta bouche,
Est un écho mélodieux ;
Parle-moi ! parle-moi !

‘ Quand ta voix meurt dans mon oreille,
Mon âme resonance, et s’éveille,
Comme un temple, á la voix de Dieu.
Parle-moi ! parle-moi !’

Her hands slipped from the keys when she had finished, and she sat motionless, unsatisfied.

The wide regret of her nature for Italy, the

sympathetic sorrow for this man, which was hardly more than a wistful wonder, the yearning for something steady throughout change, secure beyond pain, found too restricted a meaning in the words she had sung ; but the pathos of the music stole into every vein and made her heart swell.

René d'Isten was watching her as she sat against the window. His arms were crossed and pressed close to his slow-throbbing breast. He noted every tremor of the fine lips ; he saw how the eyes grew big with moisture, and the long lashes feared to move ; and he saw, and grasped, a fixed resolve.

‘ Are we all spellbound ? ’ exclaimed Mrs. Trescott, rising with an abrupt rustle of silken skirts. ‘ Ring for candles, please, Beth ; that will send away the spirits. I don’t like ghosts.’

CHAPTER X.

It has been remarked that in life, as in music, if two cannot strike the same note, or repeat it in different octaves, there must be a certain distance to avoid discord. But when they harmonise, there is an unsubstantial link which is inexpressible, yet unbreakable ; unbeseechable, yet ever besought. Where sympathy fails, nothing can join ; where it joins, nothing can separate.

‘ *Même quand l’oiseau marche, on sent qu’il a des ailes.*’

THE last Florentine morning dawned with a soft effulgence ; the sky was of rose-leaves and marigolds, the earth tremulously sweet and fresh.

Bethesda was up early, and while the dew still sparkled on the creamy roses she went into the garden for a parting reverie. She could not be sad with all this joyous beauty around her, but neither could she fully respond to its gladness. She let her eyes follow the forms of trees

and slender campanili to the deep sky, and rest there with a yearning too impersonal for sorrow or pleasure. The sea affected her in the same way; the ocean stretching out to the sky, the sky curving down to the sea, seemed to her like a great truth bending over an earnest mind, and she never wearied of such sublime monotony. It was with reluctance, therefore, that she obeyed her aunt's imperious summons to breakfast.

It was a fussy meal, for Mrs. Trescott was troubled by many things, although nearly everything was ready for their evening start.

‘Can I relieve you in any way, Aunt Mabel?’ asked Beth as they rose from the table.

‘No, no; nothing. I must do it all myself, except what Graziella can do better than either of us. You tend to your own things, and leave mine to me.’

‘Very well,’ replied the girl quietly, and, having thus seen how the land lay, presently took Assunta, and went to hear some music that

she knew was to be finely rendered at the Santissima Annunziata.

She found a *prie-dieu* in the shadows of one of the great columns, where she had the wide nave before her, with its altar lights, and clouds of rising incense ; but other things made only a slight impression upon her when the music began.

The soaring tenor notes, the throbbing pain of the baritone, the earthly despair of the bass ; the organ sending its dirge-like tones through the solemn arches, which now echoed to the joyous peal of resurrection, and again to the subsiding hush of peace attained,—to all this Bethesda responded with a spellbound intensity ; and as, at last, she bent her head on the cushion before her, who will say that the great yearning in her heart was not a prayer ?

When, a while later, Beth came out of the shadowy church, with its atmosphere of holiness, into the hot square, where the statue of the

Grand Duke whom Browning has immortalised ever looks up to the window in which his once-bespoken and never-forgotten love sat day after day to receive the salute which was their only intercourse, M. d'Isten stepped to her side. She welcomed him with a quiet glance. There was no shrinking now, no sense of being jarred. She even pursued her own train of thought uninterrupted.

‘You said, mademoiselle?’ questioned her companion presently, as they walked home together, Assunta following.

‘I? I did not speak,’ she replied.

‘I thought there was a question you would ask me,’ he answered with calm assurance.

‘Ah!’ she exclaimed, smiling, ‘I understand now. My sister has a way of saying: What would you say if you said it? You are doing the same.’

He did not mind being found out; all he said was :

‘ Well ? ’

‘ I don’t know that I should ask you——
But it might help——’

‘ You were thinking of the sermon we just heard ? ’

‘ No, not of the sermon. I don’t care for those. They seem rather to interfere than to assist. I was thinking of the symbolism of the Catholic Church, and how beautiful it was.’

‘ Yes ? ’

‘ And—and I was wondering if that was what satisfied Catholics. How can it ? ’ She was growing bolder now. ‘ There must be something more to grasp ; they cannot be content with just this.’

‘ But, mademoiselle, there is faith.’

‘ Yes, it must be your faith,’ she answered slowly. ‘ You all rest on what the Church gives you, without looking into it. You don’t feel the need to see. It must be very restful.’

‘ If we inquire, Miss Bethesda, what should we

find more than the Church gives us? And if less, why should we wish to know that? We must be like little children, and believe.'

'Ah, but I can't!' she cried in a low tone, that expressed more than René d'Isten could understand. 'One can't be a child for ever; one cannot accept blindly——'

'But the Church sees; one can follow her,' he said softly.

She shook her head, but did not reply. He did not understand her; it was impossible that he should, different as had been their religious educations, different as were their character in this. Bethesda could obey until she began to doubt; then her doubt must be solved before she could again trust. René accepted some things as he did his nationality; it was not a thing to be disputed; there could be no doubts.

The same evening they left Florence, and at the train was a pleasant surprise—at least to some. An official handed Miss Hamilton a great

dewy mass of lilies of the valley, which he said had been given him by a gentleman who, after designating *la signora* when she left her carriage, had immediately gone away.

Beth knew then that Signor Straora was aware of her departure, and she sat thinking of him for some time. Monsieur d'Isten asked Mrs. Trescott meanwhile if he should not open the window? The fragrance of the flowers was somewhat heavy, he thought.

Later, when Mabel had composed herself to sleep, Monsieur d'Isten and Bethesda sat divided by the length of the carriage, both quite still for hours, thinking and feeling.

Beth realised that she was being carried onwards to an unknown future, a new life, and looked back with a curious sadness that was not pain or sorrow, but a keen appreciation of what this life in Italy had brought her, and an instinctive shrinking from the future. She did not feel the passionate dread that had oppressed

her in entering Florence, but rather a passive knowledge that fate was speeding her onwards, irresistibly onwards, as the train through the night.

It was a mystic scene without to favour this illusion. The meadows and hillsides were glittering with fire-flies, as if the overheated earth were sending up slow sparks of fire ; the glow-worms burned their green lamps in the grass, and in the sky there was heat-lightning, like involuntary thought. Sometimes it was eerie moonlight, such as pure elves might find among the ice-caverns of the glaciers ; again it lit the clouds with the flaming rose of a wild hope ; again it was the bright amber of assurance, or the rich purple of suffering made into joy ; and at times it seemed to the entranced girl like a vision of heaven itself.

Meantime M. d'Isten's busy brain was working as incessantly, and creating as marvellous visions in his own mind. The future was his

thought, and there was all the difference between him and Bethesda that lies between activity and passivity. She was feminine in her readiness to be worked upon, unconscious though it were, and René d'Isten was thoroughly masculine in the vigour with which his mind resolved to work.

It was a chilly evening when they arrived in Paris thirty-six hours later. The city had always been a distasteful place to Bethesda. She felt a dislike to it, which she attributed to the frivolous and unclean atmosphere that seemed to taint every breath of Parisian air. She felt as if she were entangled in the meshes of a French novel as soon as the gay boulevards and glaring gas-lights came in sight.

On this occasion, however, her feeling was less insistent, for M. d'Isten's pleasure in a return to his capital communicated itself to her, and the rest after the long journey was certainly a relief.

Then, too, when they arrived at their hotel,

the same at which Mrs. Trescott had first met M. d'Isten, and were shown to the large *salon* reserved for them, they saw upon the table a rich basket of flowers that filled the air with a fragrant welcome.

M. d'Isten had remained below a few moments, and when he came up he was assailed with exclamations of praise and gratitude by Mabel.

'In memory of the Flower City,' he said, with a smile, standing framed by the *portières*, hat in hand, and his dark eyes seeking Beth, who had not spoken.

'It is a bit of dear Italy itself,' she said, with a swift glance of thanks.

'That is good! *et après?*'

'*Après?*' echoed Mabel, 'what can there be *après?*'

'Not the deluge, I trust,' he returned, still waiting.

Beth had looked around quickly, and now

espied on a tiny table in the corner, half hidden by the wine-red curtains, a Venetian vase of exquisite delicacy, containing one moss rose.

‘Ah!’ she exclaimed, ‘I have found the *après!*’

‘Let me present to you “Béthesda,” mademoiselle,’ said M. d’Isten, now joining her. ‘This rose,’ he added, ‘contains my criticism and my thanks.’

He watched her curiously as the light beamed over her face, which the mention of her writing always brought. Some confusion was in her manner; then she said:

‘You are very gentle with me, monsieur. I appreciate it, believe me. And how lovely the flower is! I never saw a white moss rose before with that warm colouring towards the heart.’

‘I thought you would like it,’ was all he said.

In spite of this good understanding on their arrival, when there was no room for anything but liking, René d’Isten found Miss Hamilton

difficult to win from her instinctive reserve—more difficult here than in Florence. The truth is, that he was a man of remarkable personal magnetism ; and a woman of as positive a nature as Bethesda, and one who possessed no little mental electricity herself, naturally sprang away from the attraction to which she had for a time half unwillingly and half unconsciously yielded.

Quite a number of friends, too, were glad to find Mrs. Trescott and Miss Hamilton in Paris, and insisted on having them to little quiet dinners or lunches, and called on them frequently. But M. d'Isten contrived, through his intimacy with Mrs. Trescott, always to make one at the impromptu entertainments that took place in the red and gold *salon*. He soon, indeed, made himself indispensable, and knew how to aid the ladies unobtrusively, as well as how to avoid any appearance of being other than a guest.

Mrs. Trescott, who enjoyed leaning when she felt at perfect liberty to change her attitude at

any instant, found him 'a great comfort;' and Beth herself could not help but notice how much more smoothly the evenings passed when he was present than when absent, as he took care to be once or twice after he had quietly established his position.

One of his opportunities to break through Beth's easy and half-indifferent reserve he improved towards the end of the week. They happened to be side by side in the embrasure of a window, and he detained her by saying:

'You have been writing to-day, Miss Béthesda.'

'Why should you think that, monsieur?' she asked, a little startled, for in truth she had spent all the afternoon on a Parisian letter.

'I am not blind,' he answered, noting the unusual brilliancy of her eyes, and the delicate flush in her cheeks.

'Have I an ink-blot anywhere?' she exclaimed.
'That is all I can fancy should betray me.'

‘I give you credit for more comprehension, mademoiselle.’

‘You flatter me, monsieur.’

‘Presently you will not say that.’

‘Ah, you are a prophet as well as a seer?’

‘Sometimes.’

‘You find a great heretic in me, I fear.’

‘I shall convert you.’

‘Self-depreciation is not one of your failings, then?’

‘There are some things one may know,’ he said, catching her eyes with a steady grasp of his own.

Her attention was aroused, and this was all he wanted. Indifference is the one thing to be dreaded when one wishes to make a friend. And, during the long hours of resurrecting spring sunshine, while he worked, as well as the starry nights, when he dreamed, he had allowed his fancies to caress the thought of securing a friendship which should indemnify him for the disappointments life had given him to bear.

Mrs. Trescott could not at all take this place. She was a charming acquaintance—delightful just where she was. There was a kind of *camaraderie* between them which was piquant and entertaining to both ; but, for any serious friendship—for anything, in fact, more than momentary—her capriciousness could not be relied upon.

Bethesda was of an entirely different nature, and she it was of whom he had determined to make a friend—a true ‘American’ friend. He had established a committee of ways and means to this end within the closed portals of his own mind, and it held its meetings frequently. The spring (it seemed sometimes that this spring had lasted for months, and again it seemed but an hour since it commenced) had entered into him with its restless longings, and he wished something definite, if nothing more than freedom to grow, to ensue.

He thought he should accomplish his purpose also, for Bethesda was in many ways as trans-

parent as crystal to him. He saw her innocence, her earnestness, her purity, with as reverential a recognition as Indians would see the limpid ball into which they believe pure hands can roll water. He also perceived her quick distrust when anything equivocal came near ; her virgin dignity which drew itself aside from anything she felt to be wrong ; and, in full view of these facts, he here took his stand. She never should feel anything to excite her distrust in him. He had seen her soul step back in her eyes from the mere approach of a tainted thought or glance ; there was a terror in such chastity—a terror and a glorious pride ! He was more proudly thankful than the world could guess that his youth had not been squandered. He had not understood its value before ; now it came to him immeasurably increased. She, the pure Béthesda, whose sensitiveness felt like a mirror the blurring of a too-close breath, should become his friend by the exercise of their best selves ; she should recognise

that here was something higher than had ever appealed to her before, and 'awake to the renown' of her own perfect womanhood.

His steel-like determination to succeed in anything he had planned made the affair seem to him a *fait accompli*, at the same time that it exerted the fascination of creation ; and, after the departure of the compatriots who had claimed so much of the ladies' attention, his deft manipulation, aided by Mrs. Trescott's liking, soon succeeded in overcoming Beth's instinct to hold herself aloof.

The days, indeed, presently took on a settled method which had for its aim to bring M. d'Isten and the ladies together as much as possible. In the morning shopping and various *affaires* divided them, but in the afternoon they would take drives to the Bois, or Passy, or some of the other lovely and historic environs of the capital, M. d'Isten being now the host, and returning with *empressement* the courtesies he had received in Italy.

The ladies enjoyed them thoroughly. Mrs.

Trescott delighted in the brilliant and changing life of Paris, the sense of being delicately cared for, and the interesting society of M. d'Isten, whom every day she more enthusiastically liked. Beth, too, felt that Paris held some uncontaminated pleasures after all. The reaction from her magnetic repulsion had set in as she came under the sway of M. d'Isten's more continual presence, and her misconceptions of him, as she now called them, had all faded away like the morning mists when the sun is high. She allowed her mind to open to him without fear—fear indeed never suggested itself. He was married, and she knew it; knew too that he was loyal to his wife, and keenly sensitive to every tie of honour. They often spoke incidentally of Madame d'Isten, and there was never the slightest blame in his accents, or anything but interest in hers.

The girl was exceedingly innocent, not through ignorance, but dauntless faith in those she once

liked. She would as soon suspect an apple tree of poisoning her as a friend of harming her. Some trees did, she knew, but hers was not of that kind. Nor was her confidence, in this instance, unshared by others.

‘Monsieur le Comte would be charming if he were not so deplorably serious,’ said a French lady, whom they met one day at the house of an American resident.

‘Why, we find him very cheerful and entertaining,’ exclaimed Mrs. Trescott.

‘Oh, for that, yes. But I mean——’ and she waved her hand airily. ‘You know there is a something some men have, an audacity, an—I know not what, which renders them truly irresistible! But then our friend is not frivolous; he has not profited by Paris; you understand? *Au contraire*, he has a position!—and a reputation! *Eh, bien*, I wish my husband had such a one!’ and the small-brained, exquisitely-dressed woman actually smothered a sigh.

‘Do you know his wife?’ another acquaintance asked Mrs. Trescott. ‘No? You miss little! It did not cease to astonish all the world, while she was here, the attention her husband paid her. He was foolish enough to be a lover rather than a husband, and she, of course, repaid it by the most ill-mannered disagreeability. Spanish, you know. For me, I don’t care for those fierce, self-engrossed southern women. She does not come any more to the city, and we do not grieve. We see a great deal more of the count!’

‘I hope we may never meet those women again!’ exclaimed Beth indignantly, when they were driving home.

‘You probably never will,’ answered Mabel carelessly. ‘But I am glad to have seen them. It makes one proud to know a man of whom women will complain in that way. Oh, Beth, we have a good, good friend in René!’

Meantime the spring was blossoming fast into

summer, with the vividness of new life on every leaf. The blue skies lifted themselves, and intensified more and more like the beloved Italy, which did not seem far away, and the three were never weary of being out of doors, and found a constantly-recurring interest in the patriotic incidents M. d'Isten would tell them, with all the fervour of his character shining in his face.

They were mostly tales of heroism, courage, and self-abnegation, and Mabel remarked it one day.

'It is the French temperament, auntie,' said Beth. 'They are always sacrificing themselves for some noble idea.'

M. d'Isten gave her a glance of pleasure.

'It isn't much self-sacrifice usually,' said Mabel. 'Glory is their goddess, and when anything promises to bring her they don't much care what they do.'

'Oh, madame!' exclaimed M. d'Isten.

'It's true,' she insisted. 'See how you over-

ran Europe, and destroyed your much-lauded *liberté*, and gave them all only an *égalité* of slavery, and no *fraternité* at all! And that is your most glorious epoch!

‘It may well be,’ exclaimed Beth, before M. d’Isten could speak. ‘See how everywhere they went the people rose to help them, because the French had first shown them how tyranny and manhood are opposed! There is not a monarch in Europe, not even the Czar, who has such despotic power as he did have, just because France has risen and pealed through the Continent the one word: Freedom! It is the “Let there be light” of the modern world.’

Bethesda’s eyes were flashing as she sank back in her seat. M. d’Isten had an expression of proud gratitude on his face, and Mrs. Trescott laughed.

‘Gracious, child! what an explosion! I didn’t know you were so devoted to France; what has happened?’

‘You know I have always admired the French,’ said Beth, her lips quivering with that sensibility which ever delighted M. d’Isten. ‘They are extremists, may be, but they are impassioned by an idea as no other nation ever was. And I do hate lukewarmness!’

‘I fancy I remember,’ mused Mabel, with a teasing twinkle in her eyes, ‘a certain young woman who wanted to kiss the ground when she landed in France last. My dear, it’s becoming dangerous. I shall have to hurry you home; you might like France best yet!’

‘Never!’ exclaimed the girl, her cheeks now rosily tinted, for M. d’Isten was watching her with curiosity. ‘I shall always like my own dear land best,—especially when I am away from it.’

‘Ah! you like it best when away from it? And you were glad to reach our France? That is good!’ said M. d’Isten, with immense satisfaction.

‘She was glad, indeed. You ought to have seen her in Dieppe, just crazy at being back again.’

‘It is true,’ acknowledged Beth; ‘and what I can’t understand is why I was so pleased to touch France. If it had been Italy, now. But then I did not particularly like France as France. I had not been in it enough, you know.’

She added this apologetically, with a glance at M. d’Isten. He did not look as if he needed any apology; he was simply radiant. He bent forward to arrange some wrap for her, and there was a new, happy security in his manner. He always treated her as if she were a frail queen, who must have every wind shielded from her with solicitude; but now there was a delicate tenderness in every touch, as if she had been consigned to his protection.

‘You have forgotten your hatred of Paris, haven’t you?’ asked Mabel.

‘Yes, I like it now. It is really homelike

to me. Somehow, I never saw it this way before.'

M. d'Isten caught his breath, and did not dare look up. He felt an inexpressible relief when Mabel remarked:

'I always told you it was your illness that prejudiced you. I read you pretty well, chérie; you can trust to me.'

And Bethesda did not say nay.

They drove home swiftly, because a little late. Every one was hastening to dinner; the boulevards were full, and the shopkeepers were like children out of school. The labour and struggle of the day seemed on every side to give place to a buoyant sense of enjoyment which is peculiarly French.

'This is the hour I like Paris best,' said Bethesda. 'How happy each one seems! Don't you suppose one is better, truer, in being happy?'

'I am sure one is,' answered M. d'Isten gravely.

'Ah, look!' exclaimed the girl.

They had rolled out from the Boulevard into the Place de la Concorde, and now the broad Elysian Fields rose gently before them, lined with deep-green trees, bearing spikes of rose and snowy bloom. At the top it was crowned by the triumphal arch, uplifted against the sunset sky, and seeming the gateway to a golden world.

Bethesda leaned forward in the landau to catch the full view; the light irradiated her face, and brought out the glory of her hair; her eyes gazed at the dazzling splendour unblenchingly, for she felt a joy that made her strong to bear any radiance. Her soul seemed to expand with a twofold life, and leaped within her. She felt an intense desire to spring forward and delay the sun in its setting, just that time might let her drink deeply of the happiness this hour held.

But she was not afraid even of darkness, and as they sped up the avenue amid the whirr of wheels and tramp of horses' feet, she watched

the glowing light pale without fear. She trusted in the new elixir which had come to her here.

Ever after, the fragrance of the chestnut blossoms, and the home-coming atmosphere, recalled that sight in magical clearness. She could see it all, and she could feel, too, as she did then almost unnoticed, René d'Isten's eyes shining upon her.

CHAPTER XI.

‘Two things fill me with awe—the starry heavens, and the sense of moral responsibility in man.’—KANT.

‘Choose well, and your choice is
Brief, but yet endless.’

GOETHE.

THE great hour came ; finally, of course, without premeditation.

Bethesda had done much writing lately ; nothing connected except her letters, but many scraps of felicitous similes, of character sketches, of word painting ; all of which had a strain of unconscious pathos in them, suggesting that, like her golden sunset sky, they might be painted only on the material of tears.

She had much thought suggested to her now, for every evening René d'Isten read aloud to them from some French author, introducing

them, with consistent choice, to that fine analysis of human nature which makes the French mind, like the Greek, stand alone. He read in a manner that let the words fall together into the vividness of reality, bringing each thought into relief, yet combining all so admirably that one could not detach any separate expression without its losing much of its value.

Then there would be discussions, or comparison of ideas, on what they had read, in which opposing views would be brought forward and reconciled,—at least between Bethesda and M. d'Isten. He was verifying preconceived ideas with a sense of the fitness of things which was indescribably keen; and Bethesda glided from surprise to surprise, in finding that M. d'Isten had a multitude of opinions like hers, only more developed and posed; and that there were a number of points which they had each reached with equal certitude by widely-diverging paths. Each hour showed how much further back than

their acquaintance dated their mutual tendencies toward one another. It was the destiny of their characters that they should meet.

About ten every evening they separated, for M. d'Isten had social engagements which his diplomatic duties did not allow him to neglect. Politicians, especially where the intrigues of Courts lead, well understand the necessity of social power to compass any end; and the very charm of this friendship which now subsisted between the three was greatly owing to the fact that in no way did it interfere with former duties or habits, but simply rounded the whole.

Occasionally, it is true, Mrs. Trescott would try to detain M. d'Isten, just to test her power; but he understood her too well to yield; and, if she played the abused, he was always rewarded by at least Bethesda's approval.

So the days and evenings came and went—smoothly, suggestively, instructively—until an

evening in the last of May struck its date ineffaceably on their lives.

Bethesda had been writing all day, hastening to send off a couple of delayed letters. It had been difficult for her to fix her mind on the incidents she needed, and she was tired. She acknowledged it when M. d'Isten inquired if her pretty work was done, that she should sit with idle hands?

'Tired hands, and tired brain too,' she replied, letting her head rest on the back of her wine-red *fauteuil*. 'Don't read, please. I have been pinning my mind so assiduously to its work to-day that it is full of holes, and ideas would go through it as if it were a sieve. Talk to us, won't you? Shan't he, auntie?'

'I am never averse to that form of entertainment,' said Mabel, smiling.

'Well, then, I will be speaker to-night,' said M. d'Isten, his long-contemplated schemes suddenly crystallising into action. 'Shall I tell you what I have been doing to-day?'

He addressed Mrs. Trescott, but moved his chair so that he could include both ladies in one glance. Madame Mabelle was fairly entangled in the meshes of her silk embroidery. Bethesda sat leaning her head, with its low masses of bronzed gold, in profile against the passionate colour. She looked somewhat sad, as usual, when in repose. Her hands were crossed listlessly ; small, maidenly, firm hands, capable of all devotion, so delicate yet strong were they ; and her eyes rested with an indistinct pathos on René d'Isten's face.

It seemed to him then that a current, invisible, mysterious, and irresistible united them. Her glance seemed to penetrate without refraction into his inmost being. But his soul could not open to it ; not quite yet. He let his eyes fall as he went on :

‘ To-day I have been writing also. I was at my desk before six o'clock. You are surprised, mademoiselle ? It is not so unusual, for I rise

early. This morning, however, I was unusually interested. I received a letter last evening from Madame d'Isten. It is a rare occurrence for her to so favour me, and it held me awake for several hours. And need I say so long a time could not pass, without my also thinking of you ?'

His glance lingered on each of his companions, and at last rested on Bethesda's hands. When he spoke it was with slow emphasis.

'You three and my father are those who stand together, and alone, in my gallery of the world.'

Madame Mabelle beamed upon him, and he returned it gratefully. Bethesda looked at him in momentary surprise. How could she belong to that select circle ? But of course it was only his politeness.

'I came to an understanding of it during the night,' he went on, 'but I can always determine best in writing, so I have it written here. May I read you a little ?'

'We should be delighted,' said Mabel.

‘ I call it : My Friends : and I take them as they came to me.’

It was written in French, of course ; its delicacy will be ruined by translation, but it must be done for truth’s sake.

‘ My father is my friend of all time. He has held ever before me the inspiring example of integrity and honour. To him, after my country, are due my allegiance and highest esteem.

‘ Louise accepted me as her husband. To her I owe willing service, ready sympathy, untiring care and affection.

‘ Madame Mabelle has conferred upon me the knighthood of her American friendship. To her I lend admiration and deferential homage. I may add that she has given me much of the keenest pleasure of my existence.

‘ Béthesda is my intellectual counterpart. She incites me to activity in every field. She inspires me to believe I am capable of doing what heretofore I have only dreamed. She com-

pletes each half-formed thought. She fills the ideal form of womanhood. To her I give fealty, reverence, and impregnable devotion.'

As the last words fell from his lips he looked up. Bethesda had grasped the arms of her chair, and was sitting upright, her eyes dazzling, and her cheeks flushed.

She lost remembrance of everything previous in the surprise of that last paragraph. She was amazed, astounded ; and yet she felt it was true. Her eyes did not sink before his as he met her quivering glance. It quivered through every barrier, every veil, to the real core of the man. It was a marvel that he could bear it unshrinkingly, but his long education served him well at this supreme need. He saw, and knew, and understood ; and at the same instant held fast to his self-possession. He was not afraid of what she should see, and he was aware now of what he should do.

Mrs. Trescott watched them in some confusion.

This was an unexpected tearing away of the veil for her. It not only surprised her, but aroused some alarm. What did it all mean? And where might it lead? As long as the paramount attraction in the tripartite friendship was held to be herself, she had no fears. Was she not nine years his elder? But here sprang up danger. The little piece of paper had sent a lightning flash over the land, and disclosed it to be a strange one, where she had supposed it thoroughly familiar.

She looked keenly from one to the other with her now black eyes.

Beth was certainly excited, and as certainly pleased. To inspire such a man's intellect was no small thing; the trouble might be, was it not too great a thing?

She turned to him. There was some excitement manifest in his manner also, but he was gravely answering Beth's eager, deprecatory questions as to how it could be true, by showing

her that her American birth, her education, her life, had all combined to make her a new person to him, and one who appealed strongly to what he was pleased to name his unwarmed, but not insensible mind.

‘Your mental vigour,’ he went on to say, ‘when you are so fragile, inspired me with admiration before I had ever seen you; and since there has been conferred upon me the pleasure of an intimate acquaintance my impression has been indelibly fixed. This is one of the pleasures Madame Mabelle has given me.’

He looked towards her with a smile, and some hidden anxiety.

‘I hope it will always be a pleasure,’ she said seriously.

‘You are good,’ he answered, purposely misinterpreting her phrase. He took her hand, and rising, kissed it.

‘Be careful,’ she said, in a warning tone so low that preoccupied Beth did not hear.

He gave her a sharp, inquiring glance. She shook her head in doubt.

‘See,’ said he in a reassuring voice, seating himself in his old position, and spreading out his hands with a frank gesture, ‘I will tell you all I have in my mind. Ever since I was a boy I have been fond of literature, but I have not had sufficient faith in myself to pursue it as a career. I am not satisfied that my thoughts are original or worth recording, or my fancies either poetical or just. In spite of these doubts I have written some, and have felt a new power since I have known Miss Béthesda. With this in view I have a suggestion to make. It has been gradually maturing in my mind until I am convinced of its success.’

He looked from one to the other to judge what might be safe to say. Bethesda was all eager anticipation, with a shadow of humility softening her face. Mabel, relieved by his words and manner, had resumed her work. He proceeded :

‘Mademoiselle is about to return to America ; her correspondence will then be stopped, you tell me. I propose, to avoid this, that in my letters to you, madame, I shall enclose some pages of incidents, which I am fortunately situated for obtaining, and which she can then mould and amplify as she would her own notes. What do you think of it, madame ?’

‘It would be very lucky for her, I’m sure,’ replied Mabel. There was no danger in this.

‘But do you think I could do it ?’ hesitated Beth.

‘Certainly,’ was M. d’Isten’s prompt response. ‘They should be identical with your own notes. You know the life here, and could give them fulness and colour to perfection. The political portions I would, if you desired, write out more amply. You could undoubtedly make it successful.’

‘I don’t see why you couldn’t,’ added Mabel.

‘I had not expected to do anything for the

papers when I went home,' remarked Beth, still timidly. 'I thought I would try magazine articles, or stories, perhaps.'

'There, too, I could aid you,' persisted M. d'Isten. 'Your ideas are different, and yet in many ways the same as mine. We study humanity from a similar point of view. You analyse and idealise man as I analyse and idealise institutions. We appreciate the same characteristics; we admire the same qualities. But you are a woman—I am a man; we will, necessarily, see different sides of life; we will have different experiences. I could give you suggestions, with, perhaps, some virile force, and you could lend them body, and form, and grace. It would make your books have an unusual character, and give them the power of appealing to a larger audience, mademoiselle.'

'Indeed it would,' exclaimed Bethesda, catching a glimpse of how much wealth would in this way reach her work, and how much good might

be done by it. ‘I wonder if it could be accomplished.’

‘Why not? We could at least try, and I have no doubts of the result. If we accustom ourselves to write together, I am convinced it will be an imperative need not again to be eliminated. My trust is not wholly unfounded,’ he added, after a moment’s pause; and then he told them of the *feuilletons* he had written; that others had been solicited but refused, because he was himself dissatisfied with them.

‘I know now that this is what I have always desired. You could round my whole intellectual life, Miss Béthesda; you could develop sources of enjoyment and benefit which never have, nor ever could be, otherwise developed;—and who can say what benefit may accrue to others, from thoughts thus combined, and perceptions doubled in strength and feeling?’

He was bending upon her the whole force of his will, and the magnetism to which she was so

sensitive. He held her under the control of his mind, as it were, but with the consent of her own will, free from all other influences. The existence which animated him was no longer simple, but complex; he had no consciousness outside the focus of this concentrated life. It must be.

Bethesda rose and paced the room to and fro. Her hands were clasped behind her; warm colour was in her cheeks, and her eyes gleamed with constantly-changing lights. Each instant she raised them to M. d'Isten's intent face, as if studying and appealing to him at the same time.

It was an immense temptation. Nothing could have been more absolutely in consonance with her tastes (didn't René d'Isten know this?); to help another, to please one she liked, to be of use, were passionate desires with her. And how much it would benefit her! The strength, and surety, and precision which she knew she lacked

would thus be gained ; and perhaps sometimes, as he said, it might do good.

There is a vigour of purpose, a vivid comprehension of the difference one soul can make, that infuses youth with a grandeur all its own. Each soul is the possible pivot on which the world may turn, and youth feels this with an intensity which make promises seem deeds, and tendencies fulfilment ; and Bethesda was in the glamour of all this now. But could it be done ? There were a thousand difficulties which she, her mind suddenly enlightened, could apprehend ; and which he, perhaps, did not. In any case hers would be the responsibility, and if he were not content—— ? She suggested this frankly.

‘ But I should be,’ he answered with emphasis. ‘ My part would always be one of suggestion : nothing less, nothing more. You would have absolute freedom to accept or reject any expression, any idea. And what you did I should not question. To me it would be right because you did it.’

‘No, no ; I must have the benefit of your criticism, as you say you wish mine. I shall need it vastly more.’

‘But it would not be feasible,’ he replied firmly. ‘I shall send you everything, and you could not send it back before publication. No ; what I once give you is yours for ever. You can keep it or discard it. You do with it what you choose.’

They talked the plan over a long time. Mrs. Trescott, because this concerned others entirely, and, perhaps, for another reason, saw more clearly than the others where it tended. Her fears, dispelled at first by M. d’Isten’s business-like manner, returned as this remarkable conception took form and reality before her. All confused as the fears were, they made her uneasy. She asked each of them to write out calmly the conditions of this compact, and follow it out to its furthest results ; they would be better able then to judge whether it were advisable to consolidate it. She even suggested to René the specific danger of future

developments. This was when Beth had gone to her room for something. She returned before he had time to answer, but his dignified self-possession and unruffled security again calmed her—especially as they acquiesced in her suggestion without hesitation.

But they were both, consciously or unconsciously, determined to carry out the plan. René d'Isten had long ago resolved upon it, and Bethesda was swayed to forget the scruples which only questioned her own inability, and to enter into it with enthusiasm.

She looked at him as she would on one transformed in her sight. All their intercourse suddenly took on a new meaning. Her place, from being that of a casual friend, below many others, was changed to that of one elected to stand alone by the side of this man,—alone, separated from the whole world, as his intellectual companion.

René d'Isten hardly dared to glance at her; he was conscious in every fibre of his being that

she recognised her position,—that she had already left her aunt, her friends, her former associations, her old self, to step into the richness of her womanhood, and take the place he had chosen her to fill. Because of the very intensity of this knowledge he ignored it, and shielded himself in his consummate self-control.

All his skill was needed in winning over Mrs. Trescott. She was of a deeply jealous temperament ; he knew half of her uneasiness—which he clearly understood, and also its well-founded reasons—was an unconscious stirring of this fatal poison. It is human nature, he told himself, to dislike seeing some one unexpectedly preferred before one's self. Heretofore he had been her especial friend ; through this evening's work he became far more closely united to her niece. It was human nature in him also, that her preoccupation and visible uneasiness, thus explained by him, should flatter him enough to make him throw much earnestness into his persuasion, and to use

eloquence with the finest art. It was highly necessary, moreover, that she should be won to their plan ; which, in the present stage, could not go on without her ; so, with the most delicate discrimination, he allayed the fears she never suspected had been aroused, and won her to a tacit consent in the experiment.

They were surprised, at last, by midnight. M. d'Isten took a hasty and apologetic leave. Mabel detained Beth, after he had gone, to warn her to look carefully before she bound herself to this compact. What if she should find this intellectual companionship meant more to her than she now thought it would ? What if it should make her unhappy ? Supposing it filled her mind so as to keep her from marrying ? Think what a lonely life that would be. She, herself, without husband or children, often found life hard, and yet she had had her nieces to educate. She did not want to see her darling, whom she had sheltered so long, saddened in the brightest period of her life. She

wanted her to be always a sunbeam, carrying light and pleasure wherever she went.

At these tender words Beth embraced her aunt, and promised her she would think; she would confront the question in its whole extent, and judge without bias.

And Mabel sent the girl off to bed, feeling as if an earthquake had taken place, and that her little girl's life had suddenly diverged far from hers. But she would resign herself if only the child might be happy.

Bethesda, once in her own room, did not think of sleep. There were two windows—one looking out on the street, the other over a garden full of trees, fragrant bushes, and vines. Some of the Virgin Vine wreathed the arched window and crept in over the low sill. She went and knelt there, leaning her arms among the tendrils, the first of many times when the small hours found her in the same position.

She felt as if her mind had an immensity as

large as the deep-blue heavens, and with as many points of palpitating white light. They might be worlds, or they might be unknown fires; she scarcely cared which. The universe was filled with the glad exultation now thrilling through her. Her heart throbbed with swift fulness; her limbs, even as she knelt, trembled under her; yet she felt a conquering strength, an illimitable power of action and devotion which caught her up into an uncalculating rapture.

Gradually, however, the hour, the silence, the distant stars, calmed her. She began to think instead of only feeling, and finally rose, lit candles, and paced up and down her room.

In writing thus together it would become of great value to both of them undoubtedly. But just here came a danger, as Aunt Mabel suggested. If they met and harmonised thoroughly in intellect, was there not a possibility of their meeting in other ways, warmer and more perturbed?

For him ?—he must decide.

For herself ?—Well, she found him, outside their compact, a noble, unselfish, and pure man. He was strong ; he had conquered himself, and thus gained the force to conquer others. He grasped her with quiet firmness ; he appealed to much of what she believed was the best in her ;—but this all mentally and morally. She wondered sometimes that she did not have to guard herself more with him ; the secret was that there was nothing against which she needed protection. They met as minds alone, and would do so more and more as their intercourse was confined to that only. Of this she felt sure.

But taking it at the uttermost ; supposing that she would find no man who could efface him, so but that he would stand high above them all ; supposing that the thought of him should prevent her marrying ;—what then ?

He was noble ; it would not be degrading to admire, even to love, mentally, a married man,

so that they remained ever on those heights where base fogs could not reach them. It could do no harm; he would never know it, or, in knowing it, would recognise it as a crystal-pure affection that contained no danger to either of them. And she would have a noble ideal, a cultivated mind, a self-sacrificing life to love. What harm, almost what sorrow, could that be to her? It would be a lonely life, perhaps sad, but an elevated one, which would in the end raise her from the tumult of an impulsive woman's existence to serene heights, whence a wider vision of the world could be obtained.

She wrote the argument out in her diary, and ended it with these words: 'I see no danger that can deter me. I accept the compact.'

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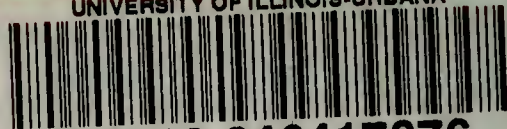
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